

## INTRODUCTION: 'A FANFARE FOR EUROPE'

*At the bar a florid man in a black suit was predicting the imminent collapse of the nation. He gave us three months, he said, then curtains.*

John Le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974)<sup>1</sup>

*In effect, what they were saying was that the final collapse of capitalism might be a matter of weeks away.*

Tony Benn, 5 December 1974<sup>2</sup>

*This year's referendum is more than a hands up for or against Europe. It is one aspect of a disintegrating political order.*

*The Guardian*, 21 May 1975<sup>3</sup>

On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. That verdict, in only the third UK-wide referendum in its history, struck British politics like an earthquake at sea. Within hours a tidal wave had built up that would sweep through Westminster and Whitehall, demolishing a political order established just a year earlier at the general election. Over the days that followed, the prime minister announced his resignation, Labour MPs declared war on their leader and the Scottish government began preparations for a second independence vote. Global financial markets, which had surged in the expectation of a vote to stay in, lost more than \$2 trillion in a single day of trading, while the pound dropped to its lowest level for thirty years.<sup>4</sup>

For good or for ill, the vote in 2016 overturned the central pillar of British economic and diplomatic policy since the 1960s. Scrabbling for a precedent, commentators likened what had happened to the

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break-up of Yugoslavia, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the British Empire.<sup>5</sup> For those who had campaigned to leave, 23 June marked Britain's 'Independence Day', when voters 'took back control' of their destiny.<sup>6</sup> For their opponents in the Remain camp, defeat was like a bereavement, stirring feelings of loss, anger and disbelief. A study by the London School of Economics claimed that more than half of Remain voters wept or felt close to tears on learning of the result.<sup>7</sup>

It had all been so different four decades earlier. On 5 June 1975, just two years after joining what was then the European Community (or 'Common Market'), voters had gone to the polls in the UK's first referendum on membership. The result was a landslide, with a majority of more than two-to-one for staying in. Voters endorsed membership by 67.2 per cent to 32.8 per cent, the biggest mandate ever achieved in a national election, almost exactly reversing the state of the polls the previous autumn. The Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson, told reporters that the European debate was now closed. 'Fourteen years of national argument', he proclaimed, 'are over.'<sup>8</sup>

The parallels between the two votes are intriguing. Harold Wilson, like David Cameron, was a reluctant European, convinced with his head rather than his heart of the case for membership. Like his successor, he led a divided party with a tiny majority in Parliament, at a time of rising hostility to membership among the public. Both deployed the referendum as an instrument of domestic political management, calling in the electorate as a political bomb-disposal unit to deal with an explosive issue on their own backbenches. It was Wilson who pioneered the offer to renegotiate the terms of membership and put them to the public in a referendum, which Cameron would repeat in his Bloomberg Speech of January 2013. Cameron followed the Wilson playbook almost to the letter; yet when he sought to replicate his predecessor's success, the device blew up in his hands.<sup>9</sup>

Writing shortly after the 1975 referendum, the political commentator Anthony King called it 'one of the half-dozen most important events in post-war British history'. It ranked, in his view, alongside the Attlee governments, the Suez crisis and the fall of the British Empire in scale and significance.<sup>10</sup> Yet it has attracted none of the attention lavished on those other historical milestones. Dominic Sandbrook, in his popular history of the 1970s, calls it 'The Referendum Sideshow', while *The Official History of Britain and the European Community*, a multi-volume project sponsored by the Foreign Office, dedicates just

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twelve pages to the referendum campaign.<sup>11</sup> Neglected by historians and political scientists, 1975 has become the property more of myth than of history.

This can be explained partly by what did *not* happen. The electorate did not, as in 2016, overturn the decision of Parliament or reverse the settled policy of successive governments. Its actions did not spark a political crisis, nor end the career of a prime minister. Voters in 1975 did not compel politicians to enact measures they had previously described as disastrous, nor challenge the authority of the political establishment. It was this, thought the *Daily Express*, that constituted the real significance of the vote. 'We are still a United Kingdom,' it exulted. 'We are still a sensible kingdom.' 'The most encouraging lesson of the referendum is that the centre held.'<sup>12</sup>

Yet the importance of what happened in 1975 is not simply negative. This was the first national referendum in British history: the first time that a front-rank political question had been taken out of the hands of Westminster and passed directly to the electorate. That marked a major constitutional innovation, at a time when there was widespread talk of a 'crisis of government'. The referendum challenged the right and even the capacity of MPs to embody the will of their constituents, striking a lasting blow against the sovereignty of Parliament.

The referendum took the European question out of Whitehall and into the country, triggering the only really sustained debate the British had ever had on their role in the world. Businesses produced newsletters, advising customers and employees how to vote. Shops issued carrier bags saying 'Yes to Europe', while Sainsbury's backed membership in its customer magazine. Bishops preached sermons on the blessings of integration, while a quarter of churches held services and days of prayer. In Northern Ireland, experiencing one of the bloodiest years of 'the Troubles', Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries formed an uneasy alliance against membership. The future Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd, held discussions in factory canteens, while the Women's Institutes, the Townswomen's Guilds and the Rotary Club all hosted meetings. Campaign literature was distributed in Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Welsh, and when the BBC screened a live debate from the Oxford Union, in the week before the poll, nearly 11 million people tuned in to watch.<sup>13</sup>

The result was the most full-throated endorsement the public have ever given of membership of the European project. Every part

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of the United Kingdom voted to stay in, with the exception only of Shetland and the Western Isles. Industrial towns and agricultural districts, Labour heartlands and Tory citadels, all said 'Yes' to Europe. As the *Daily Express* put it, in a jubilant editorial: 'Britain's Yes to Europe' had rung 'louder, clearer and more unanimous than any decision in peacetime history'. The result had shown 'decisively' and 'irrevocably' that 'Britain belongs to Europe'.<sup>14</sup>

This was to prove unduly optimistic; yet the *Express* was right about the significance of what had happened. The decision to remain in the European Community set the course of British history for a generation. Membership would reshape how Britain was governed, who it traded with and who had the right to live or work in the country. Its consequences would be felt in every area of national life: from trade policy and employment law to the criminal justice system and the peace process in Northern Ireland. Over the decades that followed, the European question would pulse like an electric charge through British politics, splitting the Labour Party in the 1980s, the Conservative Party in the 1990s and fracturing the political landscape again in 2016. It drove the two most successful challenger parties of modern times – the Social Democratic Party and the UK Independence Party – and has brought the future of the United Kingdom itself into question. As the dust settles on a second referendum, its capacity to inflame political passions has lost none of its explosive potential.

#### 'A FANFARE FOR EUROPE'

The United Kingdom had joined the European Community on 1 January 1973: sixteen years after the Treaty of Rome and twelve years after its first abortive application. Entry marked an epoch in national history; perhaps 'the most profound revolution in British foreign policy in the twentieth century'.<sup>15</sup> For the first time in the modern era, the UK had pooled its sovereignty with an alliance of Continental states. For the first time since the Reformation, its courts would be subject to an authority outside the British Isles, interpreting laws drawn up not just in Westminster but in Brussels and Strasbourg. In return, it was hoped, Britain would 'be able once again to play a worthy role in the world', gaining a voice in the destinies of a continent.<sup>16</sup>

For Edward Heath, the Conservative prime minister who had negotiated membership, entry was a turning point in British history.

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**FIGURE I.1** Edward Heath signs the Treaty of Accession in 1972. The ceremony was delayed by 55 minutes when a protestor threw a bottle of ink over Heath. Source: Hulton Deutsch, Corbis Historical: [www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/613503132](http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/613503132)

Heath had come to power in 1970 promising ‘nothing less’ than ‘to change the course of history of this nation’, through ‘a change so radical, a revolution so quiet and yet so total, that it will go far beyond the programme for a Parliament’.<sup>17</sup> Joining the European Community was fundamental to that ambition. Heath’s politics had been forged in the decade before 1945, when war in Europe had brought the continent to the brink of destruction. As a student in the 1930s, he had travelled through Germany and witnessed a Nazi rally at Nuremberg. He had visited Spain during the Civil War, witnessing at close hand the bombing of Barcelona. During the Second World War he had fought in France and Belgium, before ending the conflict in the shattered city of Hanover. European unity, he believed, was not only an economic necessity but a moral imperative. ‘Only by working together’, he wrote later, could nations ‘uphold the true values of European civilization’.<sup>18</sup>

It had taken three attempts to secure membership, and ministers celebrated with a two-week festival of culture: a ‘Fanfare for Europe’,

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showcasing more than 300 different events. The Queen attended a gala opening at the Royal Opera House, conducted by Benjamin Britten and Colin Davis, with performances by Janet Baker, Judi Dench, Laurence Olivier and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Europe's most celebrated conductor, Herbert von Karajan, brought the Berlin Philharmonic to the Royal Albert Hall, while Bernard Haitink led the London Philharmonic in Vaughan Williams' Fourth Symphony. There was a televised service of thanksgiving at Coventry Cathedral, famously rebuilt out of the rubble of the Blitz, while a Festival of European Art gathered treasures from across the Continent. Ministers had hoped to borrow the Bayeux Tapestry for display in Westminster Hall, but it was felt that the subject matter – involving the invasion, conquest and butchery of the native population – struck an unduly sanguinary note.<sup>19</sup>

The Fanfare offered something for all tastes. There was a vintage car rally from London to Brussels; a special episode of the talent show, *Opportunity Knocks*; and a beauty contest won by the Dutch model Sylvia Kristel (soon to find fame in the erotic movie franchise, *Emmanuelle*). Slade rocked the London Palladium, the Kinks played at Drury Lane, and there were performances by the Chieftains and Steeleye Span. At Wembley Stadium, a football match pitted the three new member states – Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom – against the six founder members. Bobby Charlton captained the home team, Bobby Moore renewed his rivalry with Franz Beckenbauer and 'the Three' won comfortably by two goals to nil.<sup>20</sup>



**FIGURE 1.2** Steeleye Span outside the Royal Albert Hall, 15 January 1973: Frank Barratt/Stringer, Hulton.

Source: Archive: [www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/3281658](http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/3281658)

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Sitting in the Royal Opera House on 3 January, Heath was in buoyant mood: 'my heart', he recalled later, 'was full of joy that night'.<sup>21</sup> Yet the fat lady was singing for Heath in more senses than one. The Fanfare was a flop: Wembley Stadium was half empty, events were sparsely attended and the government was accused of squandering £350,000 of public money. Opinion polls, which had shown a slender majority for entry in January, quickly turned sour. By August, more than half of respondents thought Britain had been 'wrong' to join the Common Market; by Christmas, opponents of membership enjoyed a fourteen-point lead. By March 1974, just 12 per cent of the electorate 'believed that we had obtained any benefit as a result of membership'.<sup>22</sup> An official at the Department of Trade and Industry likened the public to 'a crowd of holidaymakers who, after much doubt and expense, have made a dangerous journey only to find the climate chilly, the hotel not what it was cracked up to be and the food too expensive'. Ominously for the government, he concluded, 'bloodthirsty feelings are mounting, not only towards the other nationalities in the hotel but to the courier who got them there'.<sup>23</sup>

The mood in Whitehall was similarly grim. When John Hunt became Cabinet secretary in November, he was struck by the 'smell of death hanging over the government'.<sup>24</sup> With his premiership disintegrating under the pressure of a miners' strike, Heath was driven into an early election in February 1974. Defeat brought to power a Labour government under Harold Wilson, who shared none of Heath's fervour for the Community. The Labour manifesto promised 'a fundamental renegotiation of the terms of entry', to be followed by a referendum or a general election. It ended with a stark warning: if new, more satisfactory terms could not be agreed, Labour would seek a mandate from the public for 'our withdrawal from the Communities'.<sup>25</sup>

### 'A DEVICE OF DICTATORS AND DEMAGOGUES'

The decision to hold a referendum was highly controversial. The *Sun* called it a 'constitutional monstrosity': a 'rotten', 'silly', 'alien' and 'unconstitutional' device that menaced the very survival of democracy.<sup>26</sup> Margaret Thatcher, in her first major speech as Leader of the Opposition, labelled it 'a device of dictators and demagogues' and refused to confirm that her party would be bound by the result.<sup>27</sup> For its supporters, by contrast, the referendum promised a rare injection

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of democracy into a system that seemed more often to frustrate the popular will than to express it. Tony Benn, the paladin of the Labour Left, had been arguing since the 1960s that a mature, educated electorate could no longer be satisfied with 'the five-yearly cross on the ballot paper'. Always an enthusiast for new technology, he predicted that there would soon be an electronic button in every household, making possible 'a new popular democracy' in place of 'parliamentary democracy as we know it'. Regular plebiscites, he hoped, would make governments truly accountable to the public, while enlarging both 'the responsibility and understanding of ordinary people'.<sup>28</sup>

What followed was the first national election of the modern era to be fought outside the conventional party system, a fact that posed real challenges to all involved. The national co-ordinating groups, many of whose activists had little experience of electoral politics, struggled to police the legal guidelines on 'treating' and fundraising. Broadcasters, likewise, found it difficult to apply rules of impartiality and fair coverage to an electoral landscape whose contours were so unfamiliar. New alliances had to be constructed, often along the most unlikely lines. The campaign to get Britain out brought together left-wingers such as Tony Benn and Michael Foot; the right-wing populist Enoch Powell; Ulster Protestants such as Ian Paisley and James Molyneaux; and groups ranging from the National Front to the Communist Party of Great Britain. The 'In' campaign was led by a Labour home secretary, Roy Jenkins, and counted among its vice-presidents a former Conservative prime minister, the president of the National Farmers' Union and the former general secretary of the Trades Union Congress. In the constituencies, party activists found themselves working cheerfully with sworn political enemies, in a festive atmosphere that reminded some of the Christmas truce.<sup>29</sup>

The suspension – or, more accurately, the confusion – of party allegiances opened a space for an unusual array of campaigning forces. Voluntary organisations and ad hoc alliances played a larger role than was conventional in UK elections, while the faces that looked down from posters were those not of politicians or diplomats but of sportsmen, actors and public intellectuals. Star recruits for the Yes campaign included the boxer Henry Cooper, the Olympic gold medalist Mary Peters, and the captain of the British and Irish Lions, Willie John McBride; the No campaign claimed the support of the footballing superstar George Best, memorably described as 'the Enoch Powell

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of British football'.<sup>30</sup> Women's voices were especially prominent, and close attention was paid to the votes of immigrant communities.

### THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Attitudes to the European question have changed significantly over time, both within and between parties. In 1975 it was the Conservative Party that was most enthusiastically European. Margaret Thatcher, newly elected as party leader, stumped the country demanding 'a massive Yes' to Europe, resplendent in a woolly jumper knitted from the flags of the member states.<sup>31</sup> The Labour Party was much more hostile, with a majority of its MPs, activists and some of the biggest names in Cabinet fighting to get Britain out. Newspapers that would later become fiercely critical of the EU – including the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* – campaigned fervently to stay in. Of the national press, only the *Spectator* and the Communist *Morning Star* backed withdrawal.

The geography of the European debate was also very different. Support for membership was strongest in England, especially in counties with a strong Tory vote such as Buckinghamshire, Surrey, West Sussex and North Yorkshire. Lincolnshire and Essex, which produced the four highest votes to leave in 2016, backed membership in 1975 by 74.7 per cent and 67.6 per cent respectively.<sup>32</sup> Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were more hostile, with Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party all campaigning for a No vote.<sup>33</sup> In 1975, as in 2016, it was feared that the referendum might tear the United Kingdom apart; but in the 1970s, the



**FIGURE I.3** Margaret Thatcher in her 'Yes to Europe' jumper, 4 June 1975.

Source: P. Floyd/Stringer, Hulton Archive: [www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/641305251](http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/641305251)

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nightmare was that England would vote to *stay in*, while the rest of the UK voted to leave. The future leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond, was just one who campaigned for a No vote, telling reporters that 'Scotland knows from bitter experience what treatment is in store for a powerless region of a Common Market.'<sup>34</sup>

This was reflected in the spread of issues. Immigration, which dominated the campaign in 2016, was barely mentioned in 1975. The number of EEC nationals applying for settlement in the UK actually *dropped* after British entry, as deteriorating economic conditions made the country ever less attractive as a destination for migrant workers.<sup>35</sup> Outside Northern Ireland, where there was some concern about Catholic migration from the South, there was more concern about the *outward* movement of people, with anti-Marketeters warning that the unemployed would be 'forced to leave Britain to find jobs' on the Continent.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, issues like food prices, fishing and the Common Agricultural Policy consumed large amounts of airtime in the 1970s, yet were almost invisible forty years later.

A referendum is nominally a single-issue campaign, yet in practice the debate is rarely restricted to the question on the ballot paper. This was exacerbated in 1975 by the form of campaigning. 'Britain in Europe', the wealthier of the two co-ordinating groups, conducted extensive polling, which it used to target particular cohorts of the electorate. Dedicated campaign vehicles were created for every conceivable constituency: 'Actors for Europe', 'Christians for Europe', 'Communists for Europe', even – for one glorious moment before the leadership intervened – 'Wombles for Europe'.<sup>37</sup> High-level organisers were assigned to work with trade unionists, women, immigrants and professional groups, crafting messages that were tailored to the concerns of each cohort. The result was not simply to carry the European debate into unlikely places (though articles addressed to single parents, Commonwealth citizens and paramilitaries did precisely that). Just as importantly, the effect was to bring the referendum into contact with a much wider range of issues and concerns, so that what had begun as a vote on the European Community became a larger debate about the 'state of the nation'.

What bound all this together was a series of core questions and concerns. Elections do not take place in a vacuum: they respond to the context and climate in which the vote is held. Four themes were especially prominent in 1975: the memory of war; the ongoing struggle