

**Conflicting Visions Toward Europe in the 1975
Referendum: How Sovereignty Motivated
Conflicting Motives for Britain Staying in the
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Andrew Gong

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The four-decade union with the European Economic Community (EEC) and subsequently the European Union (EU) has been marked with tensions both between the UK and Europe and within UK. Primarily, as Edward Heath noted in 1975, the debate in Britain centers around Britain's standing in the world as either Britain alone or Britain with Europe.¹ The core of British identity stems from British sovereignty, which historians have argued to be central to British identity. For example, Forester's study on the EEC argues sovereignty gives a "distinct" British identity² while Vines argues post imperial British identity centers around Parliamentary sovereignty, the supreme authority of Westminster over all legislations within Britain.³ More broadly, sovereignty is the ability for Britain to have the power and ability to legislate policies affecting itself without other states interfering in the process. In the run up to the 1975 EEC Membership Referendum, which 'validated' Britain's membership in the EEC, sovereignty was a cause championed on two opposing sides with differing visions for Britain's role in the world and its future identity. To some, the desire to join the EEC was to advance Britain's own national interest while, to others, it was a desire to amalgamate Britain's identity and interests with Europe's; this created two mutually exclusive visions for either a British or European future. Hence, although both groups supported Vote "In", one group argued sovereignty would be protected while the other group argued sovereignty ought not be protected by joining the EEC, creating two conflicting mutually exclusive identities. In turn, Britain entangled itself into a supranational organization which would, over time, accentuate the competing visions of Britain's identity and its future, culminating into the "Brexit" Referendum.

¹ Edward Heath, "Time to Wake up from the Dream of Splendid Isolation," *The Times* (June 2 1975):12.

² Anthony Forster, *Euroscepticism in Contemporary British Politics: Opposition to Europe in the Conservative and Labour Parties since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2002): 39.

³ Emma Vines, "A Common Appeal : Anglo-British Nationalism and Opposition to Europe, 1970-1975." *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 61, no.4: 531.

In Defense of Sovereignty

Joining the EEC objectively leads to a degree of sovereignty being lost, a fact undisputed by many at the time. Under the Treaty of Rome, national governments would not be able to challenge the Commission or make subsequent modifications to anything decided by the Council of Europe.⁴ Moreover, the European Court of Justice's jurisdiction extends into Britain, challenging Parliament as the final arbiter of laws in Britain.⁵ Because there was no dispute over the aforementioned facts, the first group we will examine argued incursions into British sovereignty would not occur in practice and membership would actually enhance sovereignty. In Bradley and Ewing's legal study, they argue the government did not expect sovereignty to be infringed upon in practice.⁶ In fact, Norton's constitutional study argues the "notable and unexpected burden" of losing sovereignty was realized only after infringements occurred.⁷ In other words, sovereignty would be preserved in practice.

This group argued incursions would be minimal because of the European Parliament's obligation to consult all national governments before passing policies. Importantly, for many Britons, the consultations ensure Britain has a significant say in policies and Westminster would not become a rubber-stamp Parliament. For example, Lord Gladwyn's letter to the *Times* argued that any policy from Europe affecting Britain requires the consent of Parliament, which, in turn, protects sovereignty.⁸ Moreover, the White Paper on the EEC, disseminated broadly across British society, had similar views. The White Paper claimed that *any* directive before becoming an EEC binding law is subjected to Westminster's consultation. The *Times*' official referendum guide further argued British sovereignty is protected not only through consultations but also through the right of Parliament to (ostensibly) veto "all important" legislations from the EEC.⁹ Importantly, what tie the aforementioned arguments together is a notion of consultations before major directives to give Britain a voice. Ensuring the perpetuity of the consultation steps, the White Paper assured Britain that "the consent" of Parliament would be sought before any "major

⁴ Keith Kyle, "The Essential Reasons why we Need the Referendum to Decide on the EEC," *The Times* (March 21 1975):16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alexander Bradley and Keith Ewing, *Constitutional and Administrative Law 13th Edition* (Harlow: Longman, 2003):141. as cited in Philip Norton, "Divided Loyalties: The European Communities Act 1972." *Parliamentary History* 30, no.1: 62.

⁷ Norton, *op.cit.*,62.

⁸ Gladwyn Jeb, "National Sovereignty in the EEC," *The Times* (January 9 1975): 15.

⁹ "Times Guide to the Referendum," *The Times* (May 19 1975): 1.

institutional development” in the EEC.¹⁰ In other words, the EEC was not going to change without British consent. Importantly, the conflicting visions in 1975 do not stem from differing views over if sovereignty would be upheld in practice; rather, the conflicting vision stems from how this group viewed the EEC in terms of protecting British interests.

Because sovereignty is the ability for Britain to make and influence policies affecting the national interest, this group sought to join the EEC as a means of protecting Britain’s own interest and sovereignty. This view was widely and explicitly held by the Establishment. For example, the *Times*’ official endorsement for the EEC argued it “does not believe in large organizations [the EEC] for its own sake”; rather, realities of a post-imperial world require nation states to work with each other in advancing national interests.¹¹ With Britain pivoting towards more European trade, European trade policies increasingly affected Britain. As a result, the *Times*, along with countless proponents, argued it would be in Britain’s interest to have a say in trade policy, an enhancement of sovereignty.¹² This view was extremely prevalent in Britain that the *Times* called it the “standard” counter –argument to those who claimed joining the EEC takes away sovereignty.¹³ Like today, the *Times* referred to the case of Norway to prove its point: Norway, which voted against joining the EEC, is affected by European trade policies but has no voice.¹⁴ Crucially, Norway was not getting a fair agreement because, as the *Times* argued, European trade policies made with outsiders are “in favor of the larger community and unfavorable to [Britain]”.¹⁵ In summary, joining the EEC allows Britain to protect its interests abroad from other nations’ trade policies.

In all, arguments surrounding preserving and enhancing British sovereignty by joining the EEC center around two substantives. First, consultations with Britain would be held for all policy proposals from Europe. Second, and more importantly, joining the EEC allows Britain to preserve its national interest by having a voice in policies affecting Britain. As a result, motives to join the EEC center more so on protecting British identity and

¹⁰ David Wood, “White Paper says EEC Membership is no Threat to Sovereignty of Parliament,” *The Times* (March 29 1975):1.

¹¹ “If In, We Share the Decisions: If Our, They are Made For US,” *The Times* (May 31 1975):13.

¹² Ibid endorsement

¹³ “Sovereignty,” *The Times* (April 19 1975): 15.

¹⁴ “If In, We Share the Decisions: If Our, They are Made For US,” *The Times* (May 31 1975):13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

sovereignty. In contrast, as we will see, the next group sought to jettison British sovereignty and identity in favor of a shared European identity and destiny by joining the EEC.

Losing Sovereignty

The formation of the EEC was partly to bring together a continent divided by war so that the once “deadly rivalries ” turn into a pattern of cooperation”.¹⁶ To do so, each member state would be subjected to the influence and policy of its peers for a shared European future. This pooling of sovereignty, in turn, entails blending British identity into a European identity. Envisioning a new European identity for Britain, this group we will examine next sought to jettison British sovereignty and interests, concepts it viewed as anachronistic, in return for a collectivist European future.

Concerned about the Cold War and memories of WWII, many Europeans and Britons were rightly concerned with the prospects of another war. To many, wars stem from the rivalry between different states in asserting their supremacy. For example, Lady Jackson, in a letter to the *Times*, equated calls for preserving sovereignty as promoting “chauvinist nationalism”, the cause of “a thousand wars” in the past.¹⁷ Moreover, a prominent historian at the time, Keith Kyle, equated sovereignty to “nation state chauvinism” that stirred WWII.¹⁸ Importantly, it is unlikely either of the two were insinuating sovereignty directly causes war; rather they hint at a much larger idea: Sovereignty develops a national identity that induces deadly rivalries. But, if nations coalesced by pooling together their sovereignty and identity, it would no longer be in anyone’s interest to start a conflict.

In order to create a shared identity, a new form of patriotic identity was needed. To Christopher Sommes, a MP in favor of the EEC, this was “European patriotism”, a coalescing of each member state’s own national identity into a more collective identity, albeit British identity would not be fully lost.¹⁹ This identity was originally created and legitimized in 1973 under the Declaration of European Identity, which also affirmed “unity is a bare

¹⁶ Barbara Jackson, “National Sovereignty in the EEC,” *The Times* (January 4 1975):13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Keith Kyle, “The Essential Reasons why we Need the Referendum to Decide on the EEC,” *The Times* (March 21 1975):16.

¹⁹ Christopher Sommes, as cited in Trevor Fishlock, “Community Purpose is to Develop a European Patriotism,” *The Times* (March 8 1975):3.

necessity to ensure the survival of [European] civilization".²⁰ In contrast to the first group, this vision entailed seeing the EEC as vehicle to promote *European* interests collectively. In other words, the 'unity' is not about pursuing and protecting British interests in Brussels; rather, unity is about promoting EEC's interests as a whole. The contrasting views toward the EEC emerged a year after the referendum. For example, an editorial in 1976 argued for the "abandon[ment]" of the "system of purely personal satisfaction" where each member lobbies for "its own purely national ends".²¹ In other words, the editorial lamented the former group's more self-centered vision of the EEC, a platform to protect *British* sovereignty and interests. This view of unity and collectivism is further seen in how prominent European politicians rallied for Vote "In" in Britain. For example, a former Belgian Prime Minister stated Europeans, in the aftermath of WWII, accepted that "integrated structures" within the EEC was the only way forward because "centuries" of "multilateral relations" have failed.²² Moreover, a German representative to the European Council claimed the "British Referendum" is actually an "European Referendum", showing the presupposition shared amongst Europeans that membership equates one's issue into a joint- European issue.²³ This presupposition is more telling by the fact that, Germany, along with other countries, found it perplexing that Britain, by 1975, has spent 15 years debating membership in the EEC while other Europeans accepted losing sovereignty without "any loss of vitality" far faster.²⁴ Although this essay does not seek to explain why sovereignty was viewed with less contention in Europe, it is clear that Britain had two different perceptions toward sovereignty with the latter group more closely aligning with the European view.

Conclusion: Conflicting Visions

Despite both groups in favor of joining the EEC, the conflicting views and motives impact how Britain integrated itself with Europe. As a result, policies geared towards more

²⁰ "The Concept of National Interest has No Place in the European Parliament," *The Times* (October 13 1976):16.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Leo Tindemans, as cited in Roger Bethoud, "Mr. Tindemans Treads Warily on the Way to European Unity," *The Times* (April 15 1975): 14.

²³ "German Official to Speak in Britain for EEC," *The Times* (March 5 1975):5.

²⁴ Roger Bethoud, "Why do we Make Such a Fuss about the EEC?" *The Times* (April 21 1975):14.

European integration, especially immigration, have divided the nation between following or rejecting European policies. This struggle and divide between the two competing visions have defined Britain's 40-year marriage with the EEC: On the one hand, Britain wants to stay to protect the national interest while, on the other hand, Britain fears greater commitment towards integration. As a result, to the consternation of Britons and Europeans, in hopes of balancing two contrasting visions, Britain has straddled in the middle: Oscillating equivocally between going for more or less European integration.

David Cameron rightly understood the need to get over the European question when he called for the end of “banging on about Europe” in 2006 when he became party leader.²⁵ Then, a decade later, Mr. Cameron sought to end the ‘banging’ through another referendum, which was held in June 2016. Importantly, unlike in 1975, decades of experience with the EEC and EU have given Britain a better idea of what membership entails: The EU is not a vehicle merely to promote and protect Britain's interest; rather, EEC/EU membership requires unequivocal commitment towards integration in building a shared European future, the views of the latter group we examined. Equally important, Britain has experienced that consultations promoted as a means to protect sovereignty does not always occur in practice because the EU also serves other member states that, as we have seen, hold different standards toward giving up sovereignty. Put differently, the EU is not what the former group envisioned. With better knowledge of what EU membership entails after a marriage since 1973, Britain voted for “Brexit”. As the *Times* argued in 1975, leaving the EEC (and now the EU) would be the ultimate act of sovereignty and, in our context, Brexit is also a projection of Britain's identity and sovereignty as a *British* state on the world stage.²⁶ But, would such a projection last or would Britain ‘bang on’ about Europe again in the years to come?

²⁵ David Cameron, as cited in Philip Webster, “We can Never Return to the Policies of the Thatcher era, says Cameron,” *The Times* (October 2 2006) :6.

²⁶ “Times Guide to the Referendum,” *The Times* (May 19 1975): 1.

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