

British politicians need to reclaim leadership over the UK's EU membership debate.

by Blog Admin

*In 1975 the United Kingdom held a successful referendum on maintaining its membership of the European Economic Community. With calls growing for a new referendum on the UK's relationship with the European Union, **Oliver Daddow** argues that political leaders have largely ceded control of the debate to backbench MPs and an increasingly Eurosceptic media. Unless strong and determined arguments are made by the 'pro-EU' side, there is little hope of a new referendum producing the same result as in 1975.*



The two-to-one majority vote in favour of continued British membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1975 referendum provides some instructive lessons for today's political elite. Whatever one's view on the appropriateness of the outcome, undeniably Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath deserves credit for doggedly and single-mindedly putting the case for Britain in Europe. He emboldened those already inclined to favour EEC membership, and reached out to persuade waverers, critics and doubters (today's 'sceptics') of the merits of Britain's Community membership. In 1971 the government embarked on a wide ranging information campaign aimed at selling the EEC to the British people. In this undertaking Heath was ably supported by politicians from across the parties, and he worked synergistically with an astutely organised and financially well supported 'Yes' campaign in the country. He was also fortuitous in being able to target his messages at a less diffuse and more deferential media establishment than exists today. In tandem with putting the case for a 'Yes' vote, the arguments of the 'No' camp were vigorously and swiftly rebutted.

Jump forward to 2012. Things have changed, and dramatically so. Not least, where have the pro-Europeans gone? First of all, the landscape of 'Europe' has altered. The end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, and the eruption of conflicts caused by ethnic nationalism, have radically altered the geostrategic environment on the Continent. The idealist vision of the 'founding fathers' that helped drive the EEC into existence has all but dissipated. Paradoxically, the success of the EEC could be construed as its greatest undoing. As that early integrationist drive has gradually been lost, the EEC has had to find a new rationale and has made an awkward and much contested transition to the European Union (EU) via a series of treaties from Maastricht in 1991, to the Lisbon Treaty of 2007. The assumption of new competences at the EU level has gone hand in hand with ever closer attention to the organisation's legitimacy and the much talked about 'democratic deficit', which direct elections to the European Parliament have gone only some way to reducing. The EU is a moving target and a very large one at that.

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The second change has occurred within British politics. This is significant because the British public engages with European affairs usually only after they have been filtered through the lenses of national party political debates. The story here is a sad one of issue avoidance rather than leadership on the part of the main parties, and this seems likely to bite them all very deeply in the coming months and years. Historically the party of Europe, Conservative Eurosceptics have battled with successive leaderships, which they believe have been too 'soft' on an interfering, overbearing EU ever since the Margaret Thatcher's downfall over European policy.

In the Eurosceptic view, deepening the EU has needlessly sucked power and sovereignty from an increasingly emasculated Britain. Meanwhile, they suggest, the enlargement of the EU to countries of the former Eastern Bloc has encouraged mass immigration, undermining British identity and putting a strain on the country's welfare system and economy. The United Kingdom Independence Party is now perceived to represent a real and lasting threat to Conservative core votes on just such explosive issues. Conservative Eurosceptics have therefore petitioned David Cameron publicly and in private to stand up more firmly for Britain in European negotiations, and to put developments such as treaty changes to a referendum in the hope and expectation of securing a 'no' vote from the public.



UK Prime Minister David Cameron and President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

The only consistently pro-European party, the Liberal Democrats, has not benefitted from the profile or parliamentary foundation on which to spread pro-EU narratives. Notwithstanding the odd speech from amongst the top echelon of the party – notably Nick Clegg – it is largely compelled to toe the cautious government line so as not to cause a split within the Coalition. Meanwhile, the 'New' Labour Party of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown successfully shook off the 'Old' Labour Party's image as an anti-European party. However, it then spent thirteen years evading a national debate, avoiding holding promised referenda, fudging the five economic tests for membership of the euro, and playing up to the Eurosceptic media. These calculated moves all but nullified New Labour's potential to play an entrepreneurial role in setting out a convincing case for the British in Europe. Current leader Ed Miliband has jettisoned 'New' Labour altogether, so his thinking remains rather difficult to decipher. Today's political leaders only seem to engage with 'Europe' when compelled to by the force of events.

Thirdly, no account of the rise of Euroscepticism in Britain would be complete without reference to the climate of fear created over the past thirty years by the media. Crucially, over the longer term, we can point to the agenda-setting function played by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, in particular [the Sun](#) and even the influential broadsheets [The Times](#) and [Sunday Times](#). Murdoch's opposition to deeper British engagement with the EU, by joining the euro for instance, has come to dovetail with the opinions of many newspaper groups which, as we have seen, used to passively accept an engaged role for Britain in Europe, even if they weren't massively in favour. To the Murdoch empire we can add the Harmsworth Group (the [MailOnline](#) is the most popular online newspaper site in the world) and the heavily ideologically positioned [Telegraph Group](#) under Conrad Black and now the Barclay Brothers. In November 2010 Richard Desmond's [Daily Express](#) became the first newspaper actively to call for Britain to leave the EU, via its 'Get Britain Out' campaign. Most visible in the press, Euroscepticism is by no means confined to the daily newspapers. Internet blogs, newspaper comment threads, Facebook, Twitter and other social media have become common outlets for the expression of sometimes quite vitriolic and unsavoury opposition to the EU. All sides in a referendum campaign would look to use social media to spread their messages. The broadcast media fare better in terms of balance, but in Britain 'balance' in European reporting is a relative term.

So, the EU has changed, the party political terrain is more fractious, and there has been an almost total collapse in top-selling media support for Britain to be involved in a more integrated EU. We do not yet

know whether there will be a renegotiation of the terms of Britain's membership, or, therefore, what kind of question about Britain in the EU will be put to the people in any referendum that is held. What we can be sure of, however, is that strong, determined and robust arguments from the 'pro' camp will be needed to counter the gales of opposition to the EU that have swept all before them since the 1980s. Currently, only one newspaper actively calls for British withdrawal from the EU, and none of the main parties in the House of Commons do. It is time British politicians stopped posturing and started exerting leadership over the debates closer to home; that way, all views on Europe should gain a fair hearing.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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