

British newspapers and the EU: was it always about sovereignty and crooked bananas?

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55 years ago, British newspapers jubilantly celebrated the country's first application to join the European Community. Today, they brand all opponents of Brexit as 'saboteurs'. This change of heart can tell us a lot about the wider historical dynamics behind Britain's decision to leave the EU. [Mathias Haeussler](#) explains.



British tabloids' portrayals of Europe have always been deeply conditioned by their very particular historical contexts and issues of the time. During the 1975 referendum, the environment was one of profound crises: fresh memories of the oil shock, the three-day week, and inflation rates still at around 25 per cent all shaped the tabloids' almost universal recommendation to vote remain. 'Outside the Market', the *Daily Mirror* cried in May 1975, 'we would be exposed – and ALONE – in an unfriendly world'. In such a climate of anxiety and fear, even *The Sun* felt that the choice was clear: Britain had to stay in Europe because 'baby, it's cold outside!'

But the tabloids' stance on Europe had not always been determined by purely negative motivations. In the early 1960s, the *Daily Mirror* even tried to sell British EC membership as a highly progressive and outward-looking policy, embracing the then-prevalent liberal language of competition and social democracy. Its portrayals of Europe correspondingly focused on Europe's post-war affluence and consumerism. West Germany, for example, was a country 'where beer flows like water, and money flows like beer', and the situation in France seemed similar: 'Bellies Full, Jobs Booming, Birthrate Bounding'. Little space was given to the Continent's recent past – the *Mirror* thought it rather more prudent to stress that it was 'kissing time toujours' in Paris, and that German girls were the 'bosomiest in Europe'. At the eve of the swinging Sixties, then, the European Community was hip, cool, and buzzing – at least to the *Daily Mirror*.



Things only went downhill from the mid-1980s onwards. A potent combination of Britain's economic revitalization, Thatcher's Falklands-driven discovery of identity politics, and a left-wing EC Commission pushing for more ambitious schemes of European integration meant that the tabloids' enthusiasm morphed into widespread opposition and outright hostility. The theme of 'national sovereignty', previously largely ignored, now assumed centre stage: *The Sun*, for example, asserted in 1988 that the British people 'have no desire whatsoever to become politically involved with foreigners with whom we have nothing in common' – whereas, during the 1975 referendum, it had claimed that Britain's entire history was one of 'absorbing, and profiting by, any European influences that blow our way'. The 1980s were, of course, also when Boris Johnson first started making up stories about EC regulations for condom sizes and prawn cocktail crisps as the Telegraph's Brussels correspondent.

It is clear, then, that British tabloid coverage of Europe since the late 1950s does not simply amount to endless and seemingly eternal expressions of Europhobia. Rather, it was a highly contingent and volatile process in which portrayals of 'Europe' changed almost beyond recognition according to the political and societal climate of the day. Yet, 'Europe' always remained an external 'other' – an image against which British national identity could be defined and projected. In the 1960s, the Mirror tried to use the seemingly booming and dynamic EC as an alternative post-imperial identity for the young and affluent consumer; in the 1980s, the Sun's crusade against the EC's integrationist agenda offered comfortable assurances of British/English 'otherness' amidst the troubles of devolution and the end of the Cold War order. Europe always remained a pawn in the domestic political debate – which is why it could be hijacked so effectively during the 'Brexit' campaign.

To other EU member-states, this state of affairs of course seems profoundly irritating, if not outright bizarre – EC/EU membership has been an integral part of most national DNAs for many decades. They thus shudder in amazement, wondering why the European question has become such a key part of Britain's national discourse. Such Continental puzzlement has not entirely escaped British observers. As early as the eve of the 1975 referendum, for example, The Sun urged its readers that there were 'worse reasons for voting Yes tomorrow, and overwhelming so, than this – we can then all shut up. [...] The argument has been going on for the best part of 15 years and [...] we are in danger of boring the pants off the universe'. Sadly, however, it did not heed its own advice afterwards.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *Twentieth Century British History*, and on an upcoming [book chapter](#).

About the Author

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