

[N. Piers Ludlow](#)

Safeguarding British identity or betraying it?: the role of British 'tradition' in the parliamentary great debate on EC membership, October 1971

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Safeguarding British identity or betraying it?

The role of British 'tradition' in the Parliamentary

Great Debate on EC membership, October 1971

This article will re-visit the crucial parliamentary decision in October 1971 that Britain should join the EEC. It will explore the context of the vote and explain why so much of the debate focused on the terms of membership rather than the principle of membership itself. But it will also show that both those in favour of EEC membership and those against viewed the vote as a great matter of principle and invoked a number of key British traditions in their efforts to justify their stance. Opponents of entry thus sought to portray EEC membership as endangering three great traditions: Cobdenite liberalism, British internationalism, and the UK's ability to govern itself. Those on the other side of the argument rejected all three of these claims, viewed the choice for Europe as opting for an exciting future rather than clinging unrealistically to former glories, and claimed that they were acting in line with a central British tradition – i.e. that of being a country that mattered and had a say when crucial decisions, economic and political, were being made.

Against a backdrop of controversy about Britain's place within today's European Union (EU), and in particular the question of whether such involvement is a threat to the national character and traditions of the United Kingdom, it is important to look back at the debate that surrounded Britain's initial decision to join the then European Economic Community (EEC). This matters in part because of the frequent assertion that the true nature of the European Community was never properly discussed at the time of this original decision. Britain, it is claimed, was pushed 'into Europe' by misguided leaders while the country slept, to paraphrase the title of one of the more extreme iterations of this case (Evans 1975). But it is of value also because a return to the original debate can highlight the extent to which the decision 'to join Europe' was viewed by those responsible as being compatible with, or threatening to, Britain's fundamental traditions.

For the purposes of this article the original moment of decision will be considered to be the Parliamentary vote of October 28, 1971. This is not the only possible choice. Cases could be made for April 1961 when the government of Harold Macmillan decided to launch the first abortive bid to enter the EEC; for April-May

1967 when the Labour government of Harold Wilson decided to submit a second membership application; for June 1970 when the newly elected Conservative government led by Edward Heath revived the second British application which had remained on the table despite General de Gaulle's November 1967 veto; or for June 1975 when Britain's European membership was confirmed in the referendum that Wilson had promised voters when he was returned to power. But the October 28, 1971 vote, as the climax of over ten years of governmental and parliamentary debate, had a cathartic value that not even the 1975 referendum could match. The six days debates, involving 180 speakers, and amounting to over 422,000 words are also the most accessible instant at which to measure the aspirations and fears, hopes and misgivings, with which the British opted to become members of the European Community.

This article will begin by briefly recalling the circumstances of the 1971 debate. It will then go on to explore a number of factors that complicated the so-called 'Great Debate' and made it more than a straight clash between two rival visions of Britain and its place in the world. The awkward position of the Labour Party leadership, most of which found itself opposing the outcome of a membership negotiation that it had launched, helps explain why so much attention was placed by Wilson and his allies on 'the terms of entry' rather than the principle of EEC membership. This in turn contributed to that substantial portion of the debate which revolved around seemingly secondary matters such as the exact arrangements secured for Caribbean sugar producers, the quantities of New Zealand butter that the UK could import, or the precise extent of British waters from which continental fishermen would remain excluded. Yet despite the time devoted to such nitty-gritty affairs it is still possible to identify attempts by both sides to portray the vote as a great matter of principle and to invoke a number of key British traditions in their efforts to justify their stance. Opponents of entry thus sought to portray EEC membership as endangering three great traditions: Cobdenite liberalism, British internationalism, and the UK's ability to govern itself. Those on the other side of the argument rejected all three of these claims, viewed the choice for Europe as opting for an exciting future rather than clinging unrealistically to former glories, and claimed that they were acting in line with a central British tradition – i.e. that of being a country that mattered and had a say when crucial decisions, economic and political, were being made.

The context

In formal terms, the October 28 vote was on the motion, moved on October 21 by the Foreign Secretary Sir Alec Douglas Home, ‘That this House approves Her Majesty's Government's decision of principle to join the European Communities on the basis of the arrangements which have been negotiated’ (*Hansard*, 21.10.1971, column 912). A positive vote constituted an essential precondition for the subsequent parliamentary approval of the European Communities Bill, the legislation which would sanction Britain’s entry into the European Communities and would acknowledge the effect in the United Kingdom of pre-existing European Law. The actual passage of that bill would be a separate affair, with its clauses scrutinised between January and July 1972, a parliamentary marathon involving no fewer than 104 divisions (Kitzinger 1973, pp.386–396). None of the subsequent votes however were as dramatic or as closely followed as the initial vote of principle. A focus on the October decision thus seems justifiable.

At the heart of the debate lay the terms of accession negotiated since June 1970 between the British and the six founding members of the European Community (O’Neill 2000; Furby 2009). Heath’s government did not have to re-apply to the EEC; Wilson’s 1967 application had never been withdrawn, despite the French veto. With French opposition now lifted and the Six having established their approach to the enlargement negotiations in internal discussions spanning the first half of 1970, whichever British government emerged from the general election of June 18 was expected to open membership negotiations. It had thus been under Heath’s leadership that the negotiations had begun, albeit using negotiating briefs drawn up under Labour (Kitzinger 1973, p.83).

By the late summer of 1971 the negotiations were all but complete. Talks were continuing, it was true, over the rules of the highly controversial Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). But the vast majority of the issues had been settled and Heath’s government was anxious to begin the process of parliamentary approval so as to remain on course for Britain to enter the Community on January 1, 1973. Westminster thus became the stage for the third act in the membership negotiations drama, the first two having been played out in Brussels and in Paris where Heath and Georges Pompidou, the French President, had held a highly publicised summit in May 1971. The outcome of the play was still open. Both the main political parties were deeply split on the issue and a government victory in the vote could not be taken for

granted. The October debates were not just for show; on the contrary there was a very real sense amongst those taking part that they were engaged in a parliamentary confrontation of historic significance. As Heath put it, 'I do not think that any Prime Minister has stood at this Box in time of peace and asked the House to take a positive decision of such importance as I am asking it to take tonight. I am well aware of the responsibility which rests on my shoulders for so doing. After 10 years of negotiation, after many years of discussion in this House and after 10 years of debate, the moment of decision for Parliament has come' (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, column 2202).

The party political backdrop to this moment of Westminster history was highly complex. Heath had been elected in 1970 with a small, but normally adequate majority of 31. On Europe, however, this was unlikely to suffice, given the presence of a vociferous group of Eurosceptics within his party. In order to win the vote of principle, the government would have to rely on support from within the opposition. A year earlier this would have been straightforward. The Labour government had applied to join the EEC in 1967, a step approved by an overwhelming bipartisan majority within the House of Commons of 488 votes to 62 (Parr 2006; Wall 2012, pp.80–360). Wilson as Prime Minister had famously refused to take de Gaulle's 'no' for an answer, ensuring that Britain's second application remained a topic of Community debate despite French opposition (Pine 2007). And had Labour triumphed as expected in the 1970 general election, a new Wilson government would have opened negotiations with the Six, most probably with Roy Jenkins, the most prominent Labour pro-European, serving as Foreign Secretary and George Thomson, another pro-European, in charge of the negotiating team (Wall 2012, pp.350–360).

Heath's electoral victory, however, shook Labour's pro-European sentiments. Once in opposition, many of those who had acquiesced in the 1967 application reverted to their original misgivings, while others, notably the former Chancellor James Callaghan took advantage of the shifting mood in the party and public hostility towards EEC membership, to seize the European issue as a major stick with which to beat the government (Kitzinger 1973, pp.300–302). Somewhat more reluctantly Wilson, as party leader, followed suit (Jenkins 1991, p.320). A sizeable group of Labour pro-Europeans including Jenkins, the deputy leader, were meanwhile left marooned within a party that seemed headed for an ever more sceptical position. Officially the party's commitment to enter the Community still stood. But a specially convened Labour Party conference in July 1971 committed the party to a rejection of

the ‘Tory terms’ and instructed MPs to vote against the government’s European plans (Kitzinger 1973, pp.305–309). Heath’s ability to secure the outcome he sought would thus depend on how many of the pro-European opposition MPs were prepared to defy their party. So as to encourage Labour defections, the Conservatives decided to make their vote a free one; Labour by contrast maintained a three-line whip, a decision which also had the effect of silencing those pro-European members of the opposition frontbench who could not support their party’s position. Jenkins, Thomson, Shirley Williams and Harold Lever were all prevented from speaking as a result (Jenkins 1991, pp.329–330).

The debate

Fortunately the quality of speeches remained high despite the sidelining of such eloquent potential contributors. Indeed many of those pro-European Labour speakers who took their place, whether rising stars like Roy Hattersley and David Owen, or former ministers, like Michael Stewart, spoke with an effectiveness and commitment that made them stand out even amid a generally high standard of debate. But the Labour rebels had no monopoly on good speech making. There were some impressive contributions from all quarters, whether Tory Eurosceptics – Derek Walker-Smith and Edward du Cann were the most striking -, Labour opponents like Peter Shore or Joan Lester, pro-government Tory backbenchers like Selwyn Gummer or Christopher Tugendhat, or Liberals like David Steel and Jo Grimond.

The political background does however help explain certain characteristics of the debate that would otherwise appear bizarre. The first of these was the determination of Conservative speakers in particular to exploit Labour’s recent volte-face on the issue and ridicule Wilson’s lack of consistency. This trend produced a good range of verbal jibes, including Robert Carr’s comment about the Labour Party taking a package tour to Damascus (*Hansard*, 25.10.1971, column 1362). It was deployed perhaps most effectively by one of the Labour rebels, Maurice Edelman, who quoted significant portions of the highly pro-European speech that Wilson had delivered in Strasbourg in the context of the 1967 application (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, column 1828). And it added a moment of levity to the final day’s exchanges when Wilson unwisely sought to use the same tactic at the expense of Reginald Maudling,

the Home Secretary, who had indeed been uncertain about Britain's first turn to Europe in the Macmillan era, only to be swatted down with the instant response: 'As I recall that quotation, it referred to 1958. I have certainly changed my mind on this, but I would say that it is rather more understandable to change one's mind in 13 years than in 13 months' (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, column 2119).

The recent nature of Labour's reversal also explains why so many of the Labour rebels were able to speak, with great sincerity, about how unaccustomed they were to finding themselves out of step with their party leaders. This was not a revolt manned by the professional malcontents. Instead, it was largely made up of those who had been within the mainstream of their party only months before, but had found themselves unable to jettison their European beliefs with the rapidity shown by others. That the most strident calls for the Labour pro-Europeans to change their mind came from left-wingers much more accustomed to defying the Labour whips only made the position of the pro-Europeans that much more striking, as Ivor Richard pointed out.

Since being a Member of Parliament I have not voted against my party on a three-line Whip. I hope that some of my honourable Friends will forgive me if I observe that a large section of those now advocating that I should stand on my head and vote against my principles and, instead, vote with my party, have far greater experience of the way in which one votes against a three-line Whip than I have. So if I need lectures on party loyalty I do not think, with respect, that I would first turn to them (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, column 2148).

A third characteristic of the debate linked to Labour's changed position, but also a product of Heath's rhetoric and the consistent lack of popular support for EEC entry was the huge amount of time spent discussing whether or not the Conservatives had a 'mandate' to carry out so significant change in Britain's international, economic and constitutional position. Predictably this was a line of argument passionately advanced by those opposed to EEC membership, sometimes accompanied by the statistic that over 60% of Conservative candidates had failed to mention Europe in their electoral addresses in 1970 (e.g. *Hansard*, 25.10.1971, column 1428). This last point though was unsurprising, given that the election had been fought at a time when all three major English parties were committed to EEC membership and so the European choice had not been an issue of contention in the campaign. The stubbornly hostile state of public opinion towards EEC entry, as revealed by multiple opinion polls, was a more serious issue, however, especially given Heath's public pledge to take Britain into the EEC with 'the full-hearted consent' of the British people. The

government had sought to redress the unpopularity of membership by running an ‘information’ campaign about the EEC that had at times transgressed the line between neutral information and propaganda – a charge that was repeatedly levelled at Heath during the debate (e.g. *Hansard*, 21.10.1971, column 937). But despite such efforts polls continued to suggest much public anxiety about EEC membership and little of the enthusiasm for the political unity of Europe that had characterised opinion amongst the Community’s founder members (Jowell & Hoinville 1976).

Much time in Parliament was thus spent agonising about whether MPs were entitled to adopt a position on an issue of such importance that ran contrary to the views of their constituents. Responses amongst those in favour of EEC membership varied widely. Some contested the validity of opinion polls in general or sought to suggest that their own attempts to consult their constituency had not revealed the same degree of disquiet (*Hansard*, 21.10.1971, column 983). Others acknowledged the concern felt by much of the public but argued that this was inevitable before a change of such magnitude and would vanish once the benefits of membership began to be felt – a line sometimes backed up by allusions to public misgivings amongst the founder member states when the Treaty of Rome had been signed (*Hansard*, 22.10.1971, column 1166). And multiple others delved into Parliamentary tradition, using Edmund Burke to argue that MPs should be free to take crucial decisions without necessarily following the views of their electors. An alternative approach was to attack the courses of action being suggested by those who insisted upon a mandate. Edelman for instance dismissed the idea of a referendum – a minority choice even amongst those who felt that the public ought to be given their say – as ‘the instrument of the demagogue’ (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, column 1827). Nor would a general election be much more helpful, given that both main parties were split on Europe and there would be many constituencies in which one or more of the candidates would have positions on the issue at odds with their party’s official line (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, column 2125).

The most conspicuous consequence of Labour’s last minute change of heart, though, was the salience within the debate of the terms of membership, as opposed to the principle of membership itself. This was not, admittedly, an entirely new phenomenon. Ever since Macmillan had made the 1961 application conditional on Britain being able to negotiate adequate safeguards for the Commonwealth, British farmers, and the UK’s partners in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the

terms of membership had played a central part in the British debate about entering the EEC (Milward 2002, p.310 ff.). Nor was it strange that individual MPs should want to discuss the precise repercussions of ‘joining Europe’ on particular interest groups of concern to them. But the fact that the Labour leadership had submitted the membership application under discussion, and remained wedded, officially at least, to the idea of joining the EEC were the right terms to be negotiated, meant that much of the opposition could only disown the government motion on the grounds that the ‘Tory terms’ fell short of what a Labour government would have required.

The upshot was a debate in which the fundamental rights and wrongs of EEC membership were often semi-hidden behind an argument about the precise safeguards agreed with the Six for a number of interest groups liable to be hurt by Community policies. Perhaps the most predictable sectors to be examined were farming and fisheries (e.g. *Hansard*, 22.10.1971, columns 1096-1113). Each represented a significant economic activity in a large number of constituencies. And each was liable to be affected by the Community’s two most interventionist policies – the CAP and the CFP. That trawler men and apple growers, horticulturalists and hill farmers were all periodically invoked is unsurprising and very much in line with what occurred in the comparable debates amongst other member states seeking to join the Community. But where the British debate diverged from the norm was the amount of attention paid to interest groups far beyond the United Kingdom itself. New Zealand butter and cheese producers, sugar cane growers in Australia, and above all the sugar producers of the West Indies were all discussed at length, exposing sharp divisions of opinion about whether their interests had been adequately addressed (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, columns, 1822, 1928, 1941, 1957 & 1969). The Commonwealth had become less of a problem for the exponents of British EEC membership than it had been in the early 1960s, largely because Commonwealth countries had been able to sense the way in which the wind was blowing ever since 1961 and had sought to diversify their export patterns as a result, but it still constituted an emotive issue for many parliamentarians (May 2001).

A clash of traditions

The prominence of the Commonwealth in the debate about membership terms also signals the importance within the Great Debate of a number of broader appeals to British history and tradition. At one level indeed it is possible to view the

parliamentary clash of October 1971 as one that pitted those in favour of preserving what they regarded as vital characteristics of the British world role and manner of governing itself, against others who were willing to jettison such traditions and boldly leap into a shared European future. Looked at in these terms, the three big issues at stake in the 1971 European choice, were first the Cobdenite liberal tradition of ‘cheap food’, second the related internationalist tradition, and third Britain’s tradition of parliamentary democracy. Each of these deserves to be examined in turn.

The first highly populist appeal to tradition made by those opposed to Community membership was the need to protect a Cobdenite liberal tradition of buying food cheaply on the world market, with resultant low food prices in the shops, against the shift to a system where European farmers were supported by means of artificially high food prices. It had long been recognised that a move from the traditional UK system of agricultural support to the CAP was likely to entail a substantial increase in food prices (Ludlow 1997, pp.93–94). Exactly how big this rise would be was hard to calculate, given the shifting nature of both world commodity prices and the artificial European prices that lay at the heart of the CAP. Estimates hence varied wildly. Amongst those opposed to British membership however there was agreement that joining the EEC would break with Britain’s longstanding tradition of buying food cheaply on the world market – a tradition that had prevailed ever since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The Labour MP David Stoddard was one of many to bring this up during the Great Debate complaining

It seems absolutely crazy to substitute for a cheap food policy a dear food policy merely to subsidise the development of a foreign agricultural industry which will then compete on perhaps not equal terms with our own.... Having built a strong industry, we now find that the British housewife, not the British taxpayer, is expected... to subsidise the development of continental agriculture (*Hansard*, 21.10.1971, column 962).

Michael Foot, meanwhile, made a more explicit link to the Cobdenite tradition. On October 25 he thus declared ‘The end of the era of cheap food is no small incident in British history, even if the Leader of the Liberal Party is not prepared to shed a single tear at the abandoned tomb of Richard Cobden’ (*Hansard*, 25.10.1971, column 1263).

The perceived incompatibility between Britain’s traditional pattern of food purchases and the CAP also underpinned the fierce exchanges around the question of how much Britain would contribute to the Community budget. Under the European agricultural system, shaped as it had been by the very different needs of continental

food producers such as the Netherlands and France, Britain was liable to pay heavily for the tradition, which it hoped in part to retain, of importing much of the food it needed from extra-European producers, since the levies imposed upon imported foodstuffs would go directly into the Community budget. UK receipts from that same budget would be lower than those of its partners, meanwhile, because partly as a result of its longstanding cheap food policy it had proportionally fewer farmers than most other member states and would therefore receive less by way of CAP support, still at this stage the biggest item in the Community's overall budget. The outcome would be a situation in which the UK paid more into the Community budget than would be expected given its size and wealth, while receiving significantly less money back from the EEC than other countries of a similar stature. It was hence certain to be one of the major net contributors to Community coffers, perhaps the single biggest contributor. As with food prices, however, exactly how much the UK would end up paying was impossible to calculate with any precision, since much would depend on the evolution of UK trade patterns, on the gap between world and Community food prices, and on the broader development of the EEC budget. Again therefore wildly varying figures were bandied about in the course of the debate, with opponents of entry predictably selecting the most alarmist 'guestimates'.

Such economic arguments about the costs – to the food buyer and to the tax payer – of joining the EEC, shaded into the second major tradition to be invoked by those hostile to British membership, namely that of internationalism. Thus for many Eurosceptics, especially but not solely those on the left of the Labour Party, a decision to enter the Community would imply not a broadening of the UK's international horizons but their contraction. In certain cases, this view sprang from the belief that the EEC was a narrow rich-man's club, bound to favour its own interests over those of others, to behave in a protectionist fashion inimical to the interests of the developing world, and still shaped by the reactionary views of some of its members, notably France. A clear example of this vein of thought was the speech by Joan Lestor on the opening day of the debate:

The main objective of the E.E.C., as I see it... is to protect and defend the rich European nations against the rest of the world. That is clear for everybody to see. It is concerned with improving itself. I accept that one of its by-products is that we can give more to the developing world. But if Europe is to be seen in this context—and this is how I see it as an internationalist—the major competitive interests centred in Europe ultimately will seek to strengthen their own power. This is the history of any organisations which band together for

the purpose of improving their lot, and this will be in the nature of the E.E.C. But this power which will be used to strengthen the E.E.C. will not include the developing world (*Hansard*, 21.10.1971, column 956).

Britain should thus cultivate its own independent ties with the developing world, rather than restricting its ability to do so by joining the EEC. Other opponents still seemed to place their faith in the type of North Atlantic Free Trade Area arrangements with which the Wilson government had briefly flirted. Jeffrey Thomas, a Welsh Labour MP, argued for instance that rather than turning to the EEC, Britain should launch ‘[a]n initiative which included North America, E.F.T.A.—which the pro-Marketeers seem to forget altogether—and the rest of non-E.E.C. Europe and Japan alone would account for over three-quarters of the industrialised non-Communist world. That is enough for a start. That is a big enough market for this country’ (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, column 1971). And a third group, more often Conservative Eurosceptics (or anti-Marketeers as they tended then to be called) continued to believe that Britain should either rely primarily on the Commonwealth, sometimes the white Commonwealth – i.e. the old Dominions like Australia and New Zealand – or put its faith in a long term trend towards world wide free trade (e.g. *Hansard*, 27.10.1971, columns 1819-1822). Such claims had a degree of populist appeal given the still strong sentimental ties between Britain and Australia, New Zealand and Canada, even though their economic credibility had declined significantly in the light of the dwindling relative importance of trade between Britain and its former colonies. Uniting all these disparate notions however was the sense that Britain should be international, should be open to world trade, and should be involved in global affairs, but would best be able to fulfil this internationalist and global vocation outside of the EEC. Community membership would threaten rather than bolster Britain’s traditional global commitment, eroding its existing commercial ties, and limiting its ability to build new relationships.

The third key tradition perceived as being at risk was the United Kingdom’s ability to govern itself. For some, both of the left and of the right, this danger centred on the incompatibility between European supranationalism and British notions of Parliamentary sovereignty – in other words the type of sovereignty argument that has remained at the heart of Eurosceptic critiques of the EC/EU right up to the present day. But before looking more closely at some early manifestations of this enduring line of thought, it is worth briefly mentioning a more ephemeral anxiety which while

also involving fears about lost independence centred not on the somewhat abstract notion of parliamentary sovereignty but instead on a specific technocratic policy domain, namely regional policy – i.e. the ability of central government to channel money towards less prosperous areas of the country. This was a theme that loomed surprisingly large in the October 1971 debates, perhaps reflecting the sizeable number of Eurosceptic Labour MPs from peripheral parts of the British Isles. Of concern to many of those who spoke on this theme were two inescapable realities of EEC membership. The first was that areas such as Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, or the north of England that were already peripheral within a UK economy, would become even more so were Britain to become part of a larger entity, the economic centre of which would lie in what was termed the ‘golden triangle’ of Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Eastern France. Second, by entering the EEC Britain would cede its ability independently to determine its regional policies, thereby endangering its existing tax relief and subsidy schemes. So not only would the disadvantaged areas grow still more disadvantaged because of EEC membership, but the existing mechanisms for alleviating the problem would be called into question by European competition rules and by the Community’s own incipient regional policy. Particular alarm surrounded the idea that European Commission approval would have to be obtained for new forms of regional assistance. As William Ross, the MP for Kilmarnock put it, ‘There is no doubt in my mind that our regional policies, which were successful to a certain extent under successive Governments, will not, and cannot, be successful under what is proposed. The regions will be further away from the centre, and, therefore, it will be more and more difficult to get industries to go to them’ (*Hansard*, 26.10.1971, column 1501). Others adopted more sensationalist language, one speaker challenging the government to say how they would prevent ‘large parts of Britain from becoming Northern Europe's Calabria’ (*Hansard*, 26.10.1971, column 1619).

The sovereignty case elevated these fears of Britain losing the power to govern its own affairs from the specific instance of regional policy to the more general level of principle. In the process it also sought to shift the underpinning of scepticism from a technocratic fear about Britain losing control of a particular aspect of governmental action to a more populist refrain about fundamental British liberties being at stake. Some such warnings flirted were over-dramatic. Elystan Morgan opened his speech by stating:

I... welcome this opportunity of taking part in this historic debate. There has been nothing like it before in the history of Britain. It must by almost any consideration be regarded as the last of its kind. Parliament is about to decide on its own a matter affecting the lives and the future of the British people.

A time will come soon when, whatever decision is made by Parliament in a number of spheres, it will be necessary for that decision to be ratified by a Council of Ministers or by a European Commission or by the European Parliament. At this moment this debate has a real meaning for those of us who have the privilege of being Members of the House. We are able to decide this issue knowing that our own decision is unaffected by the will or the decision of any body outside (*Hansard*, 25.10.1971, columns 1422-3).

But others revealed a rather greater degree of familiarity with the way in which the Community operated – and the manner in which it might evolve. Sir Derek Walker-Smith for instance, while unable to resist a certain amount of oratorical hyperbole - ‘In time, the edifice of our Parliamentary system, built by the resolution of our forefathers and sustained by the sacrifice of successive generations, would crumble at last in the dust’ – did at least acknowledge that the scope of the Treaty of Rome was initially limited to a number of economic domains and would hence leave large portions of British sovereignty unaffected. Even these, however, might be threatened in due course, given the openly declared desire of many pro-Europeans to see the Community’s sphere of operation expand. He too therefore concluded that EEC membership would pose a fundamental danger to a notion of Parliamentary sovereignty, thereby eroding a central feature of the way in which Britain had long been governed (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, columns 2129-2136). Tony Benn, Michael Foot, Peter Shore, Enoch Powell, Edward du Cann, and Robert Taylor all presented variations on the same theme, albeit variations coloured by their highly divergent positions on the political spectrum. The populist ‘no taxation without representation’ slogan was invoked on several occasions, normally in reference to the introduction of Value Added Tax (VAT) that would accompany EEC membership but also sometimes more widely in the expectation that other forms of taxation would ultimately be affected by EEC entry (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, column 1935). And multiple speakers attacked the Community for its bureaucratic nature and lack of democracy. A strong component of the anti-Marketeer case thus centred on the threat to Britain’s traditional habits of governance posed by the alien methods and goals of the Treaty of Rome.

In response those in favour of EEC membership tended to adopt two main approaches. The first was to seek to rebut each of these alleged threats to British traditions, suggesting either that they were based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the Community as it was or as it might become, or that they were grounded in an illusory view of Britain's existing power and influence. The second, by contrast, was to reject the notion of clinging onto tradition, and instead present EEC membership as an exciting step into a bright new future. As such this second strand of pro-Marketeer rhetoric echoed Rab Butler's famous rejoinder to Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour Party leader's 1962 suggestion that EEC membership would constitute the 'end of a thousand years of history': 'For them [the Labour Party] a thousand years of history books – for us [the Conservatives], the future' (*The Guardian*, 12.10.1962).

Alarmist claims about either rising food prices or the crippling nature of Britain's budgetary contribution were thus countered by disputing the projected figures, highlighting Britain's ability once inside the EEC to begin to address those features of the CAP that it most objected to, and the prediction that the rising prosperity which it was hoped EEC membership would bring would both soften the impact of increased food prices and outweigh the potential threat to the UK's ever-fragile balance of payment position posed by high contributions to the EEC budget. More fundamental still was the suggestion that food prices should probably not be the main criterion on which so politically vital a decision should rest. As one Conservative MP put it en route to portraying the EEC as a vital mechanism for preserving peace in Europe: 'I remind the House that nearly 200 years ago the Americas were lost to Britain over the price of a packet of tea, and I would earnestly hope that on this occasion Europe and Britain will not be lost to posterity over the price of a pound of butter' (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, column 1978).

In rejecting the idea that Community membership would mark the end of British internationalism, advocates of EEC entry made a number of interlinked points. The first, highlighted in the government White Paper advocating entry, was that greater prosperity would allow Britain to spend more on aid (The United Kingdom and the European Communities, 1971). Second, the inward-looking nature of the Community was disputed, both by highlighting the sums spent by the EEC and its member states on aid, and by noting the large number of developing countries that had already become, or would become after enlargement, associate members enjoying

preferential access to European markets. Michael Stewart, for instance, who as Labour Foreign Secretary had been deeply involved in the 1967 application, noted:

It has been argued that the E.E.C. is an inward-looking body and a white man's club. In the course of the argument, fewer things have been more clearly demonstrated than that the Community, both as a body and its individual members, has been able to be more generous in ways that we should like than British Governments have been able to, even with the best will in the world. So far from being inward-looking, the extent of the world over which it makes arrangements and agreements and the area of the world which turns towards it are increasing steadily. Therefore, we are more likely to find ourselves getting more remote from parts of the Commonwealth if we stay out than if we go in (*Hansard*, 26.10.1971, column 1516).

Third several of the Labour rebels queried how true internationalism could be furthered by rejecting the opportunity closely to cooperate with the rest of Europe, especially given the increasing role within the governments of the Six played by socialist parties. As A.E.P. Duffy put it at the end of speech that had made much of ties between the Labour party and like-minded Europeans,

it is distressing for me to see Socialist colleagues turn away from Europe and a practical opportunity to further the international brotherhood of man. But when they invite me to join them in the Lobby against entry they distress me even more. For they are not only asking me to vote in defiance of my basic convictions and sense of duty to my constituents, they are also asking me... to join them in a Lobby that, however fortuitously, is confidently expected to attract representatives of the forces of all that is most narrow, parochial and puritanical in our society (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, columns 1985-6).

The counterblast to the sovereignty case was also made up of several different components. One argument was that the United Kingdom would enjoy the right to veto any Community developments of which it disapproved. The Luxembourg Compromise of 1966 was thus presented as a major step in making the EEC more congenial for Britain. The Foreign Secretary asserted at the very start of the debate:

Political change, it is agreed, has to be unanimous. On all important matters they [the Six] have found that they must proceed by consensus. That is the experience after ten years of practice in the Community. The reason is clear. Great countries with the history of the European nations cannot be dragooned or coerced into a pattern of political association which one or the other of them does not like. The attempt would be folly. It would break up the Community. Even to try to do such a thing is totally against the spirit of the association (*Hansard*, 21.10.1971, columns 920-921).

Second large areas of domestic policy remained untouched by the EEC and were likely to remain so. The attempt by some opponents of entry to question what might

happen to the social security system within the Community was rejected on these grounds, for instance. Third, the idea that Britain would retain pure and undiluted sovereignty by remaining outside of the EEC was strongly disputed. The country had already signed up to multiple international commitments that limited its freedom of action, from NATO through to the United Nations. Furthermore, within an interdependent world it was questionable how much sovereignty any state retained. Several of the Labour rebels who had recently witnessed the decimation of their party's plans to reform Britain at the hands of the international money markets were especially forceful on this point. David Marquand for instance asked rhetorically why the Labour government had been blown off course, before providing his own brutally honest answer:

They were blown off course because economic power was not under their control. They were blown off course because no nation of 50 million people in the modern world can be wholly the master of its own economic destiny, wholly master in its own economic house. That is a fact of life whether we like it or not. I believe that if we try to create a Socialist society in isolation from the rest of Western Europe and the rest of the Western world, we shall go through the same miserable experience as we did from 1964 to 1970. I do not believe that alternative is valid. I regret it—emotionally, I regret it. Emotionally I can see the attractions of creating a Socialist society in Britain alone, a sort of beacon to lighten the rest of the world. It is an attractive vision, but it is not real; and I do not see it as a practical alternative.

It therefore followed that the aims of the political left could best be realised in cooperation with their European partners rather than in isolation (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, columns 1914-1917). Hattersley, Stewart, Robert Maclennan, and Edmund Dell all made very similar points.

Even more pervasive amongst the pro-Marketeers was the refrain that a choice for Europe was a forward-looking move whereas a vote against would be a backwards step. To some extent this involved dismissing the arguments of opponents as being shaped 'by myopic nostalgia, by Mittylike dreams' to use Gilbert Longden's phrase (*Hansard*, 25.10.1971, column 1383). But it was also furthered by repeated declarations that Europe represented a way of breaking out of the frustrations of the recent past and embracing an exciting future. Thus for Gummer, 'The real choice is the opportunity which the Common Market gives, on the one hand, and the certainty of decline which removal from the Market would give if we make the wrong choice' (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, column 2026). Dick Leonard, one of the Labour rebels,

announced: ‘I shall not be voting with the majority of my fellow Party members tonight. I shall be casting a vote for Europe. This will be a vote for wider opportunities and a higher standard of living for the people of Britain. It will be a vote in favour of closer international co-operation and a vote for peace. It will be a vote for the future’ (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, column 2172). And Jeremy Thorpe, the leader of the Liberal Party, predicted ‘I believe that a large majority will cast their votes to unite and expand an outward-looking, free democratic Europe, because by doing so they will cast their votes for a better world’ (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, column 2129). A strong streak of idealistic optimism suffused much of the pro-European case.

Simply to conclude here, however, and to present the 1971 choice as a vote for tradition or advance, stasis or progress, would be misleading. For a start it would be to do a disservice to the opponents of entry, most of whom eschewed the sort of xenophobic or parochial Little England rhetoric that might perhaps have been expected, and instead sought to raise a number of sincere, thoughtful and often well-argued concerns about what British involvement in the integration process might entail. Quite a number of their warnings, furthermore, whether about the costs of the CAP, the budgetary burden likely to be faced by Britain, the rather depressing short term prospects for European economic growth during the 1970s, or the creeping expansion of European powers and areas of activity with all that that might mean for national sovereignty, now look rather more prescient than some of the rose-tinted assumptions of those advocating EEC entry. But to caricature the choice in such a fashion would also be to overlook the extent to which a central plank of the ‘yes’ case – especially when voiced by Conservatives – also appealed to a longstanding British tradition, namely that of Britain’s role as a global power deeply involved and influential in the key debates of the day. It is therefore this final invocation of British tradition that the last part of this article must address.

An excellent example was provided by the speech of Ivor Stanbrook, a Conservative MP. He began by recalling the merits of the British empire. The world had changed, however, and the empire was no more. The country thus needed a new outlet for its energies and talents – an outlet that Europe could provide.

I do not advocate joining Europe out of lack of an alternative policy. I advocate it because I believe that the British race...has made a unique contribution to the progress of mankind in the past and is now far from having exhausted its vitality, whatever the geo-political context in which it may operate; and I advocate it because I believe that the wider the arena in which

Britain's power and influence is exercised, the better for mankind (*Hansard*, 27.10.1971, columns, 1941-1946).

Frontbench speakers tended to be more careful about sweeping generalisations on the virtues of the British people. But running through the speeches of both Home, opening the debate, and Heath closing it, not to mention multiple other Tory MPs in between, was a persistent argument that Britain had been influential and had grown accustomed to such influence, but that in order to retain influence it had to be able to contribute to the vital decisions being taken amongst the member states of the European Community. To quote Home,

when Germany, France, Italy and the rest sit down to talk about their problems of security, and their attitude to world problems, I use the word in the most accurate sense when I say that it is vital that we should be in their councils. During the last year I have twice been in the councils of the Ten, because they have anticipated the larger Community. Matters are talked about there which concern the defence of Europe and the defence of Britain. Matters are talked about—for example, the Middle East—which have the greatest implications for our country. It is essential that we should be in the councils when these questions are discussed, and that a decision should not be taken without us (*Hansard*, 21.10.1971, column 922).

And Heath, to whom it is apt that the last quotation should be given, advanced a strikingly similar line of argument, noting the European Summit meeting planned for 1972 in which key discussions would be held about monetary issues, trade, and Europe's political future, and emphasising how essential it was that Britain was represented at such a gathering.

If by any chance the House rejected this Motion tonight, that meeting would still go on and it would still take its decisions which will affect the greater part of Western Europe and affect us in our daily lives. But we would not be there to take a share in those decisions. That really would not be a sensible way to go about protecting our interests or our influence in Europe and the world. But to be there as a member of the Community, in my view, would be an effective use of our contribution of sovereignty.

Surely we must consider the consequences of staying out. We cannot delude ourselves that an early chance would be given us to take the decision again. We should be denying ourselves and succeeding generations the opportunities which are available to us in so many spheres; opportunities which we ourselves in this country have to seize. We should be leaving so many aspects of matters affecting our daily lives to be settled outside our own influence. That surely cannot be acceptable to us. We should be denying to Europe, also—let us look outside these shores for a moment—its full potential, its opportunities of developing economically and politically, maintaining its

security, and securing for all its people a higher standard of prosperity
(*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, columns 2211-2212).

Conclusions

Immediately after Heath had finished speaking the historic vote on the principle of joining the European Community was held. The outcome was a decisive vote in favour of the motion by 356 to 244. Crucial to the size of this victory – and indeed without which the vote would instead have been lost – was the decision of 69 Labour MPs to defy their party and vote in favour. Twenty others abstained. This more than compensated for the 39 Conservatives who voted ‘no’. The stage was thus set first for the lengthy pitched battle to get the detailed European Communities Bill through Parliament, and then for Britain to take its place within the newly expanded Community of Nine on January 1, 1973. After more than ten years of debate about whether Britain should join the EEC, a decisive answer appeared to have been given.

In making this choice, parliament seemed to have been swayed more by the desire to see Britain continue to matter on the European and world stage, and by the hazy but oft-invoked appeal of greater prosperity and an exciting new future within an integrating Europe, than by the threat that EEC membership had been said to pose to several core British traditions. None of the passionate pro-European arguments had wholly demolished the concerns being raised about how Community membership might affect Britain’s long-standing tradition of feeding itself cheaply on liberally traded commodities, the UK’s multiple and deep-rooted links with many regions of the world beyond the European continent, or the country’s ability to govern itself wholly with laws made in Westminster. Nor, as events would prove, were the sceptics being purely alarmist in their dire predictions about the budgetary costs of EEC membership or the less than rosy short term future of Western Europe’s economy. But such considerations had ultimately been of less importance for those who voted on October 28, 1971 than a strong sense that to reject EEC membership would be to spurn a chance to reverse two or more decades of economic and political decline, and to invite a degree of marginalization in European and global affairs that was all but impossible to swallow for a political generation brought up to believe that Britain was and ought to remain a great power.

Looking back at the Parliamentary Great Debate – at the exchange of economic and political, populist and technocratic arguments reviewed by this article, and at the appeals to both tradition and a bold new future- does not just explain why this step was taken, however. It also helps explain why this seemingly fairly clear-cut decision has turned out to be one that has repeatedly been called into question. This is not, it should be stressed, to accept the claim, made both in the immediate aftermath of UK's entry and again much more recently, that the British were misled and persuaded to accept membership in a narrow commercial entity without being aware that the EEC was a political project liable to develop in the future. The Great Debate provides no evidence for this at all, since both those in favour and those against, alluded repeatedly to the political nature of the Community and to the multiple political implications of either going in and staying out. Yes, there was a lot of discussion about the economic consequences of the choice, in part because of the emphasis on the terms of membership, and in part because the economic arguments for and against seem to have had the greatest resonance amongst the wider public. But the political dimension was of immense concern to the political elite and was discussed passionately by both those in favour and those against. Their views moreover were widely covered in the press. Nobody who read any of the reams of newsprint on the Great Debate could have harboured any delusions on this score.

More significant in terms of explaining why the Great Debate failed to end controversy over Britain's European choice, is the way in which a close reading of the parliamentary exchanges underlines quite how passionately against the EEC many of the opponents of membership were. A substantial core of the anti-Marketeters were hostile to the very notion of Britain in Europe in a manner that was unlikely quickly to fade once the 1971 vote had been lost. Instead there was every likelihood that the debate would need, in effect, to be restaged albeit in a different form, once Heath had been replaced by a Labour government. Furthermore, it is also the case that through a mixture of ill fortune and poor tactics many of the benefits of EEC membership most eagerly anticipated by those who had cast their votes in favour were either slow to appear or did not materialise at all. The fact that Britain's entry coincided with the start of a major global economic downturn meant that the hoped-for surge in prosperity did not happen. The UK's halting economic performance in the 1970s probably had little to do with the decision taken in 1971 and might even have been worse had the country remained outside of the EEC, but the recession certainly meant

that there was no lengthy economic honeymoon of the sort that the six founder members of the EEC had enjoyed. Economically the bold new future outlined by so many of the pro-Marketeers did not live up to expectations.

Even more importantly the anticipated political pay off was much less tangible than hoped. From 1973 onwards (and indeed even from 1972) the British were included in the councils of the Community and able to play their part as crucial decisions were taken. But here too reality diverged sharply from what had been foreseen. For a start the collective gatherings of the expanded Community were hard hit by the economic downturn with the result that reaching consensus proved more painful than had often been the case in the less turbulent times before Britain had joined (Möckli 2008). Britain, moreover, in part because of its ongoing misgivings about Community membership, failed to assert itself in that leadership capacity towards which Heath – and Macmillan and Wilson before him – had unquestionably looked. Instead, when bold new steps were taken, as with the establishment of the European Monetary System in 1978-79, France and Germany retained their firm grip on the steering wheel, with Britain confined to the much less exhilarating role of manning the brakes (Dell 1994). And even more insidiously public attitudes failed to take that crucial step of which Heath had confidently spoken in his winding up speech, and went on regarding the Community as ‘they’ not ‘we’ (*Hansard*, 28.10.1971, column 2209). Thus even when advance did resume, this was more of a threat than a triumph, a menace to Britain’s traditions and interests, rather than a source of pride about the new traditions and patterns of behaviour collectively being forged with European partners.

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