EUROPE AND THE BRITISH PRESS

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Abstract: Britons set great store by sovereignty, though they may be uncertain what it means. It seems to have to do with Britain’s being an island; with having withstood invasion since 1066; and with being a monarchy. Having established a parliamentary democracy without devising a constitution or suffering revolutions; having been the ‘cradle of the Industrial Revolution’; and having ruled the most far-flung empire in world history are also factors.

Britain has been more comfortable in its relationship with the United States, since 1945, than it has been with its foreign-language-speaking neighbours. Europe was a problem; the United States was the solution; and the Commonwealth was an obligation. Britons accepted the logic of a decimal coinage (in 1971); and metric measures have gradually insinuated themselves alongside imperial measures. Application for membership of the European Economic Community was late and grudging; and every paragraph of every treaty that has been signed since 1973 has been fought over, line by line. Politicians of both parties agreed for opt-outs, and a reduction of Britain’s contribution to the Community budget. The referendum (an unfamiliar feature of British constitutional practice) has been invoked by politicians of the left and right as a device for reaching decisions once and for all – and left and right have cried ‘sovereignty’ when they feared the pass was about to be sold.

Britons have been inclined to welcome each new member, or group of members, of the Community: Greece in 1981, Spain and Portugal in 1986, and Sweden, Austria, and Finland in 1995; enlargement seemed to mean that German ‘hegemony’ would be diluted, and that the self-serving French commitment to the Common Agricultural Policy would be increasingly untenable. For these reasons, and in order to correct an historic mistake, a generally warm welcome is being given to the accession of the ten new members to the Union in 2004. It is the consequence of this enlargement for the way the Union is run that is the cause of widespread anxiety at the present time.

The British press has always been freer to take an independent political line than the broadcasting authorities in Britain. Newspaper owners and editors have enjoyed enormous power to shape public opinion – even, as they would claim, to make or break governments. It is said that Britons buy more newspapers than the citizens of other European countries, but that they trust them less. In truth, it is difficult to tell just how much influence a 35mm upper-case headline, or a hard-hitting article, or editorial, does have on its readers; but the received wisdom is that headlines in The Sun and The Daily Mail, in particular, cost the Labour Party the general election of 1992. It is no secret that Tony Blair courted the good
opinion of Rupert Murdoch, the owner of The Times and The Sun (among other papers), before the election of 1997; and his government has always been wary of alienating readers of the Mail said to be representative of the voters of ‘middle England’.

Newspapers of every political complexion have lambasted the ‘bureaucracy’ in Brussels from the first day of British membership. They have been slow to acknowledge the moneys that have flowed into regeneration projects in Britain’s more disadvantaged regions, but speedy to mock the ‘wine lakes’ and ‘butter mountains’ of the CAP, and the petty corruption that appears to be endemic on the Brussels ‘gravy train’. The Times, for example, judged the EU Commission ‘unfit to run a corner shop’, when the Court of Auditors questioned all but 5 per cent of the EU’s 2001 accounts (The Times, 17/3/03); and the normally Europhile Guardian inveighed against MEPs’ bid for large salary rises and exemption from national income tax (The Guardian, 5/6/03). When the tabloid newspapers cannot think of legitimate grievances against Brussels, they invent stories about plans for straight bananas and standard-sized tomatoes.

It is most unlikely that British newspapers will revise their positions on Europe, whatever benefits may or may not accrue from the project. The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph (owned by Canadian Conrad Black), and The Sun (owned by Australian-American Murdoch) are most rootedly Eurosceptical – some would say Europhobic; The Daily Express, The Times, and The Financial Times remain to be persuaded; and The Guardian, The Independent and The Daily Mirror broadly support European integration – but not, it should be noted, federation. No-one will countenance use of the ‘F-word’, any more than they will reference to the ‘United States of Europe’.

So much for the background: let us now look at different stances taken by British newspapers to the developments in the spring and summer of 2003 towards a European constitution. This is a separate issue, of course, from the debate on whether or not Britain should adopt the euro in place of the pound – but there are links. Thus, in mid-May, the government was expected to make a statement on the extent to which the Chancellor’s five economic ‘tests’ for adopting the euro had been met: the pro-euro Guardian pointed out that if Mr Blair refused a referendum on the issue, the cross-party Britain in Europe campaign would collapse. The Sun on the other hand, vehemently anti-euro, claimed that General Motors had vindicated its position by investing in Britain rather than in the eurozone: this was ‘conclusive proof’, The Sun leader ran, that ‘we are doing brilliantly outside the crippled eurozone’ (The Sun, 13/5/03). The paper’s political columnist Richard Littlejohn (in the same issue) suspected trickery behind the government’s focus on the euro debate:

Blair has been content to allow the argument to focus on the euro, hoping he could slip the new European Constitution – which would sound the death-knell for Britain as an independent nation – under the radar. That’s not going to happen either. He’s been rumbled as people have woken up to the threat of being swallowed by the new superstate.
This is the authentic voice of The Sun. When publicity was given to certain provisions in the 105-member convention’s first draft of a European constitution, The Sun called it “the biggest threat to our way of life since the Normans landed in 1066”, and the Mail called it “a blueprint for tyranny” (The Guardian, 17/5/03). The Mail, in particular, was at the forefront of a campaign to press the government to hold a referendum on the new EU constitution (indeed, it ran a referendum of its own, whose outcome was predictable). The Guardian accused this campaign of ‘jumping the gun’: it cited the results of a recent opinion poll, according to which 84 per cent of the statistically representative sample voted for a referendum, whilst 81 per cent acknowledged that they knew nothing about the work of the convention (ibid.). The Chairman of the convention, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, tried to calm UK fears of a European ‘superstate’, and the UK government itself, in the person of its representative on the convention, Peter Hain, dismissed calls for a referendum on the grounds that the draft would not propose anything radically new; it was merely ‘a tidying-up exercise’. A week later (24/5/03), it was confirmed that the preamble to the draft constitution would not – reportedly at Tony Blair’s insistence – contain the F-word. Peter Hain was able to claim a small victory over those who were campaigning for a referendum.

Pressure on the government was not only being applied by eurosceptic journalists, however: foreign secretary Jack Straw had argued that the draft constitution would not propose that there be an “EU foreign minister”; the europhile Guardian, in its leader column (27/5/03), argued the contrary – that Europe would need to speak with one voice on foreign affairs. Guardian columnist Hugo Young went further, in the same issue of the newspaper: those who were campaigning for a referendum on the EU constitution – and he had the Conservative Opposition in mind here, not merely the right-wing press – hoped that such a referendum would mean Britain’s withdrawal from the EU altogether; Young suggested that the government call the Tories’ bluff, run a referendum (‘Do you want to stay in the EU? Yes or No?’), campaign for a Yes vote, and settle the matter once and for all. The Conservatives would deny (as Iain Duncan Smith, Conservative Party leader did deny, in Prague on 10 July – see below) that their call for a referendum on the constitution amounted to a call for withdrawal from the EU; but the government was probably in no doubt but that, if Young’s question was put to the British people, the answer would be – at best – an embarrassingly close-run thing.

The Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition have both made major speeches on Europe in capital cities of what Donald Rumsfeld has famously called ‘new Europe’: Tony Blair made his speech in Warsaw, on 30 May. “We want a union of nations, not a federal superstate,” he said, “and that vision is shared by the majority of countries and peoples in Europe.” Daily Telegraph columnists Benedict Brogan and Andrew Sparrow quoted from Mr Blair’s speech at some length – a speech in which he rebutted right-wing ‘myths and falsehoods’ (“the end of a thousand years of British history, absurd stories that we’ll lose the proceeds of North Sea Oil, we’ll lose our seat in the Security Council, we’ll lose two million jobs, we’ll be forced to drive on the right…”); but they gave the last word to Michael Ancram, Conservative spokesman on foreign affairs. “It is true that there are those who want to withdraw from Europe,” Mr Ancram acknowledged. “There are those like Mr Blair who want to create a European superpower. Conservatives want the middle way
between these two extremes.” No matter what Mr Blair might say, it suited Mr Ancram, and it suited The Daily Telegraph to portray him as an extremist (The Daily Telegraph, 31/5/03).

The cabinet re-shuffle on 12 June, involving Peter Hain among others, was another opportunity seized upon by The Daily Telegraph to keep the issue on the boil. “The elevation of Peter Hain as Leader of the Commons [does not] inspire confidence,” an editorial warned. “This is the man who is busily giving away Parliament’s powers at the European convention.” (The Daily Telegraph 13/6/03). The Financial Times was more exercised, on the same day, by a bargain struck by Jacques Chirac, of France, and Gerhard Schröder of Germany, in respect of the CAP.

“The informal agreement to emasculate reforms to the EU’s €43bn (£30.3bn) farm subsidy regime is a profoundly unwelcome glimpse of the potential for horse-trading that could paralyse the Union after it expands from 15 to 25 member states next year (…). The convention wants to see an increase in qualified majority voting to prevent a Union of 25 states being paralysed by national vetoes. These events show that even without the veto, cynical pacts can have the same effect. (“A Contemptible Deal’ The Financial Times, 13/6/03)

This was a serious charge; but The Financial Times does not have a wide readership, and, in the event, the reform of the CAP that was subsequently announced could be presented as a break-through of sorts. And when the draft constitution was finally published, some steam was taken out of the Eurosceptics’ case. The Independent represented it as coming closer to "Peter Hain’s description of ‘not much change’ than to Eurosceptic charges of a great leap into euro-federalism”. An editorial called it “a compromise intended to please everybody and alter little”. In particular, it appeared to be designed expressly to “please a British political establishment driven by fear of the mildest accusation of a pooling of sovereignty” (The Independent, 14/6/03). Even The Daily Telegraph could find little in the advisory text – and nothing at all that was new - to which it could take significant exception. It accepted that, though there were still details to be thrashed out, nobody would want to go through ‘the ordeal’ of negotiation again. It accepted (mixing its metaphors) that the European constitution was now “cast in stone”, but it did not concede on the case for a referendum. “The only question is whether the French, Danes and Irish will vote in their referendums, and if the British will be given a chance to join them” (Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, The Daily Telegraph, 14/6/03). It did not appear to be optimistic that they would.

Often, unforeseeable, sometimes trivial events will cause more upset than the calm deliberations of committees: such was the storm that erupted at the beginning of July when Silvio Berlusconi of Italy assumed the EU presidency, and made a spontaneous remark that offended the Germans. Press reaction was mixed and meaningful: The Financial Times confined itself to wondering what sort of president Berlusconi would make “if he cannot even communicate in civilised language with fellow EU leaders” (4/7/03); Robin Cook, in The Independent, suggested that Mr Berlusconi might have given “a massive boost” to the case for an EU president on the lines proposed in the convention (4/7/03); and Rosemary
Righter, in *The Times*, welcomed Mr Berlusconi’s free-wheeling forthrightness, and claimed that he was just what Europe needs, someone who will “challenge the Brussels consensus and the outworn Franco-German model of social Europe” (4/7/03). For *The Daily Mail*, Mr Berlusconi’s outburst was one more stick to beat Europe with – one more piece of evidence for the case for disengagement: Mr Berlusconi, an editorial thundered, is “sleaze personified …”

But Mr Berlusconi isn’t alone. Sleaze is endemic in the EU. Imagine the consequences, then, if Mr Blair adopts the EU constitution – without a referendum – and submits Britain to a political culture rooted in the abuse of power. *(The Daily Mail, 4/7/03)*

For Conservative commentators, the summer of 2003 had supplied an abundance of good reasons for Euroscepticism. First there was the rift between Britain and France and Germany, in particular, (or between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Europe, as Donald Rumsfeld would have it) over the war in Iraq; then there was what was generally referred to in the press as the ‘corruption scandal’, in the Commission; there was the continuing ‘slowdown’ in the economies of eurozone countries; France was persisting in its refusal to co-operate in reform of the CAP; and now, following the Berlusconi ‘gaffe’, two other members of ‘old’ Europe were locked in a dispute about national stereotypes. In many ways, the events of the summer of 2003 have demonstrated (to adapt a Conservative Party election slogan from the past) that ‘Europe isn’t working’; and the fear is that as membership of the Union grows from 15 to 25 in 2004, it will work even less well than it has until now. The Romano Prodi solution – a more integrated ‘United States of Europe’ – is favoured by few; indeed, no British newspaper editor dare nail his colours to this mast. The Giscard Convention solution is supported by all signatories to (what has yet to be called) the Treaty of Athens: the pro-Europe press in Britain backs the Blair/Hain interpretation of this treaty as a ‘tidying-up exercise that need only be ratified by a vote in Parliament, whilst the Eurosceptic press demands a referendum on what they consider to be a constitutional innovation that will have a far-reaching negative impact on UK sovereignty.

This was the line taken, unsurprisingly, by Iain Duncan Smith, on 10 July. Mr Blair had spoken in one capital of the ‘new Europe’, Warsaw, on 30 May; Mr Duncan Smith chose another, Prague, in which to launch what *The Daily Telegraph* called his party’s ‘vision of the future of Europe’. “In a city that symbolised the liberation of Eastern Europe from Soviet tyranny,” said its leading article,

> the Conservative leader proposed a ‘democratic revolution’ to restore power to the nation state. He demanded a referendum on the constitution, insisting that Parliament has no more right to lay Britain’s sovereignty at the feet of a European constitution than it has to ban elections.

*(The Daily Telegraph, 11/7/03)*

The *Telegraph*, the *Mail*, and *The Sun* put their combined editorial weight behind Mr Duncan Smith: “Mr Blair submits to the embrace of the new EU constitution without even
the pretence of democratic consent,” the Mail complained (11/7/03). “Why shouldn’t free sovereign nations co-operate peacefully and trade on a level playing field without the crushing weight of bureaucratic control? No-one doubts what the answer would be, were voters offered the choice.” Trevor Kavanagh in The Sun went further: “The choice is between a dynamic free-wheeling new Europe that delivers freedom and choice – or a paralysed Old Europe that risks bringing angry voters to the point of revolt” (The Sun, 11/7/03). The Daily Mirror disagreed: this was not the choice on offer. The real choice was between a Britain prospering as a member of the EU, or a country in which “millions would pay the price [of withdrawal] in lost jobs, a collapsing economy and terrible cuts in services as the UK plunges down the wealth league table. That is the reality of Mr Duncan Smith’s anti-European obsession” (The Daily Mirror editorial, 11/7/03).

The British press is polarised; the British Parliament is polarised; Britons are polarised. We all desire the end: the enlargement of the European Union; but we are divided on the means and, of course, there is nothing so polarising as a Yes/No question. The Daily Mail is quite right: we do know what the answer would be if voters were offered the choice as that choice is defined by The Daily Mail, or by The Sun. For all that right-wing, populist commentators deny that a referendum would be about whether or not Britain would remain a member of the EU, would a No vote on a putative referendum not amount to support for withdrawal from the new Europe as it is about to be re-constituted? Mr Duncan Smith asked in his Prague Speech: “If this constitution was the answer, what on Earth was the question?”

The question was how to adapt EU institutions to the challenge of enlargement. The convention has put forward a means by which this challenge might be met. Newspapers that have been suspicious about the European project from the beginning – that have done rather little to educate their readers on the subject – demand a referendum in the full knowledge that 81 per cent of voters know little about the constitution, and care less. It is ironical that Iain Duncan Smith who – as all Conservatives do – has defended the sovereignty of Parliament against Brussels should want to hand the responsibility for a complex decision to voters who might have supposed that they had authorised Parliament to make decisions of this very sort on their behalf. Few readers buy newspapers to be ‘educated’, of course; and editors know well that careful, impartial analysis does not sell. A government with a large majority can afford to put bills to the vote without too many worried glances up at the press gallery; but when the official opposition is weak, the press (the ‘unofficial opposition’) carries all the more clout.