The Referendum on Europe, 1975
Transcript

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is the fifth of six lectures on Britain and Europe since 1945, and in this lecture, I am going to talk about the referendum of 1975. That was the year in which we held our first national referendum on whether we should stay in the European Community or not. We have only had one other national referendum and that was on the alternative vote in the year 2011.

In this first referendum, voters were presented with, first, a statement, and then a question. The statement was: “The Government have announced the results of the re-negotiation of the United Kingdom’s terms of membership of the European Community.” The question which followed was: “Do you think the United Kingdom should stay in the European Community (the Common Market)?” We had joined the European Community in 1973, so this was 2.5 years afterwards. The outcome of the referendum was that around 17 million people voted yes, and around 8 million people voted no, so roughly 67% voted yes and 33% no, and there was a turnout of 65%, around two-thirds, so it was a massive majority of around 9 million people for staying in Europe. The result was announced on the 6th of June 1975, the anniversary of D-Day, by coincidence.

Now, from this referendum experience, you might draw two conclusions: the first was that the British political leaders had decided and wished to discover what the British people really thought about Europe; and the second conclusion would be that the outcome of the referendum proved that the British people had become enthusiastic Europeans. I think both of these conclusions would be mistaken, and the purpose of this lecture is to show why they are mistaken.

Of course, there is also a topical relevance to this lecture because we are promised a further referendum... [Trumpet fanfare outside] I do not know if it is a fanfare to Europe perhaps...! That is the title of Edward Heath’s chapter in his autobiography on the European referendum – it is called “Fanfare to Europe”. Perhaps that it!

Of course, we are now promised a further referendum on Europe, in 2017 by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, if the Conservatives win the next General Election, and it will be interesting to see whether there are any lessons we can draw for that experience for either David Cameron or others.

Until the 1970s, the referendum was thought to be unconstitutional in Britain because Parliament was sovereign, and it was also thought to be somehow a weapon used by dictators and not by democratic governments.

In 1945, Winston Churchill had proposed a referendum. He wanted to continue with his wartime Coalition Government and suggested to Attlee, the Leader of the Labour Party that this should be put to referendum, but Attlee dismissed that, saying, “I could not consent to the introduction into our national life of a device so alien to all our traditions as the referendum, which has only too often been the instrument of Nazism and Fascism. Hitler’s practices in the field of referenda and plebiscites can hardly have endeared these expedients to the British heart.” But Attlee’s argument was not, I think, very strong because the fact that Hitler and Stalin misused referendums is not an argument for not using them properly, any more that Stalin’s fraudulent one-party elections are an argument for not having elections. In fact, the referendum has been used by most democracies from time to time – almost all democracies have used it.

The argument about Parliamentary sovereignty is not very strong either because, if Parliament can do anything it likes, surely it can call a referendum. What it cannot do is to be legally bound by the result, but of course, politically, Parliament would not expect to go against the view of the people.

Now, the referendum argument came to the fore in the 1970s on the issue of Europe, and it was advocated mainly by those who were opposed to entry, and most, though not by any means all of them, most of those were in the Labour Party and on the left, because, as I said last time, party alignments at that time were almost completely opposite to what they are today. The pro-European party was the Conservative Party – they were broadly united. Labour were split on the issue, rather as the Conservatives are today. The Nationalist parties were against – the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists were hostile and advocated a “no” vote in the referendum. Today, of course, they are enthusiastic supporters. Today, people say, well, Scotland might not wish to stay in the United Kingdom if the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union against their wishes, but the worry in the 1970s was the opposite, that the whole of the United Kingdom might vote yes, but Scotland might vote no and that would give a fillip to the Scottish Nationalists, who were the only party in Scotland campaigning for a “no” vote. So, alignments were almost completely opposite to what they are now. The only consistent party are the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors, the Liberals, who then, as now, were the most enthusiastic of all the parties towards involvement in Europe. If you saw the Clegg/Farage debate, Clegg’s predecessors would have made exactly the same arguments in the 1970s.
As I said, the Conservatives were the European party, and that, at the time, included the new Party Leader, Margaret Thatcher. Now, she had won the leadership from Edward Heath in February 1975, just four months before the referendum, and in April 1975, Margaret Thatcher and Edward Heath, together, launched the Conservative Party’s pro-European campaign, which we are going to watch in a moment. It is a museum piece because you do not often find Margaret Thatcher and Edward Heath praising each other, but if the IT people have got the film, we can watch the beginning of the campaign.

[Video plays]

MT – Margaret Thatcher
EH – Edward Heath

MT: ..expression of democratic...

EH: …further phase, that of the referendum. The Party has made its view clear that is opposed, in any case, to a referendum as a constitutional device. We regard it as abhorrent. We also regard it as unnecessary. We regard it as part of a party political manoeuvre. But, if there is to be a referendum, then we are going to throw everything we have got into the task of winning that referendum.

MT: Europe will develop without [sound problem]…and colleagues. It is especially appropriate that we should open the Conservative campaign to keep Britain in Europe under your chairmanship [applause] because you have done more than anyone else for the Conservative cause in Europe, and to see that Britain’s place is in Europe. Naturally, it is with some temerity that the pupil speaks before the master because you know more about it than any of the rest of us, and I therefore main reasons for Britain staying in the Community. First, the Community gives us peace and security in a free society, the peace and security denied to the past two generations. Second, the Community gives us access to secure sources of food supplies, and this is vital to us, a country which has to import half of what we need. Third, the Community does more trade and gives more aid than any other group in the world. Fourth, the Community gives us the opportunity to represent the Commonwealth in Europe, a Commonwealth which wants us to stay in and has said so, and the Community wants us to stay in and has shown it to be so.

As I say, rare footage...

As you saw from that film, Edward Heath was opposed to the referendum, and indeed, most of those who wanted Britain to stay in Europe did not favour a referendum, but the paradox is that the referendum gave the pro-Europeans the largest victory they have ever had.

The commitment to it came about not through any principled view that the British people ought to be consulted but from a series of accidental contingencies and vicissitudes. Its main purpose was not to discover the views of the British people, but to hold the Labour Party together, the Labour Party being badly split, and to prevent it splitting.

In the 1970 General Election, the last election before we joined the European Community, all three party leaders favoured entry and all were opposed to a referendum.

Edward Heath said that you could not possibly “…take this country into the Common Market if the majority of the people were against it, but this is handled through the parliamentary system.”

Now, this meant that, in the General Election of 1970, there was no way in which a voter who was opposed to British entry could make her view known through her vote, and also, therefore, it follows that the Government could not say it had a popular mandate for entry, and the Conservative manifesto of 1970 said: “Our sole commitment is to negotiate, no more, no less.” But the test of the success of the negotiations would be determined by MPs, not by the people in a referendum.

Heath had said that a Government could not possibly take Britain into Europe if the majority of the people were against it, but for most of the period from 1967 to 1971, there were fairly solid majorities against entry. But, from late 1971, opinion began to move in favour and there was a small majority in favour in January 1973 when we entered – 38% to 36%, within the marginal statistical error. Opinion then began to move against and remained against until the re-negotiation was completed in March 1975.

We owe the referendum to the late Tony Benn. It was he who first put it forward. He first raised it as early as May 1968, when he was Minister of Technology in Harold Wilson’s Labour Government. At that time, he was a supporter of Europe and he argued for it on the grounds of popular participation, participation being a favoured theme of the late-1960s. Then, in 1970, after the General Election, he wrote a letter to his constituents in Bristol and said that, “If the people are not to participate in this decision, no one will ever take participation seriously again. It would be a very curious thing to try to take Britain into a new political entity, with a huge potential for the future, by a process that implied that the British public were unfit to see its historic importance for
In the 1970 Election, the Labour Party was defeated. Heath was returned to office. At the end of 1970, Benn raised the possibility of the Labour Party committing itself to a referendum at Labour’s National Executive, but he could not find a seconder for the motion. But James Callaghan, senior Labour leader, very shrewdly said at that time that the referendum might be “a rubber life-raft into which the whole Party may one day have to climb”, and that proved to be so.

From 1971 onwards, the very complicated European Communities Bill made its way through Parliament, and in March 1972, a Conservative backbencher who was opposed to Europe, called Neil Martin, proposed an amendment calling for a referendum, and this meant the Shadow Cabinet had to decide what to do about it, and they decided to oppose this motion.

But the very day after this happened, President Pompidou in France said he was going to have a referendum in France on whether the French people approved of British entry into Europe...and he was doing this for internal party political reasons, to weaken his opponents on the left, who were split on the issue. It was clear there was going to be a majority “yes” vote, and he perhaps did not appreciate the effects of this on British politics. But there were going to be four new members of the European Community: Britain, Denmark, Ireland and Norway. In the end, Norway did not join. The other three countries were all having referendums. France was having a referendum on whether Britain should enter, but Britain was not. One cynic wrote to the newspapers that when Heath has spoken of full-hearted consent of Parliament and people, he meant full-hearted consent of the French Parliament and people...

After this, Labour’s National Executive voted narrowly in favour of the Benn proposal. Then, a couple of days later, pure coincidence, the Heath Government announced there was going to be a referendum, though they called it a plebiscite, in Northern Ireland, on the border, on whether people wished to remain in the United Kingdom or join the Irish Republic. At this point, the Labour Shadow Cabinet agreed to the referendum.

So, it came about through a series of really unforeseen contingencies and vicissitudes, completely unplanned, this very fundamental change in the British system. But there were, in my opinion, good arguments for it, and the first, I have already given, that the party system could not resolve the issue properly because all three parties were in favour of membership, so there was no way in which the democratic party machinery could work.

But the second argument, I think, is even more important, that even if the party system had been working efficiently, there are some issues that are so fundamental that a decision by Parliament alone will not be accepted as legitimate. This point of view was put forward by the Labour Leader of the House of Commons, Edward Short, in March 1975. He said: “The issue continues to divide the country. The decision to go in has not been accepted. That is the essence of the case for having a referendum.”

This is perhaps a substitute for a written constitution because, under our system, a Government, even if elected by a small majority, can make fundamental changes without any checks or balances upon it. Now, for most issues, that is probably accepted without too much complaint, but it was not accepted on the European issue, which was seen as a massive transfer of power, and so, for that, it seemed that a validation by the people is needed. There are other issues of a similar kind. Clearly, Scottish independence is such an issue, and so also is an alteration in the electoral system, like the alternative vote. So, you may argue the referendum meets a constitutional gap in our arrangements.

It can be argued that the referendum played a crucial part in helping the Labour Party to win back power in February 1974, in which it won a very narrow victory by four seats over the Conservatives, did not have an overall majority – it was a minority Government.

One of the key influences on that Election was Enoch Powell, who said he could not stand as a Conservative candidate in the Election because he disagreed with the Government’s incomes policy, but during the Election campaign, he said that those who were against membership of the European Communities, as he was, had an opportunity to secure British withdrawal through the referendum. He did not explicitly advise people to vote Labour, but that was the clear implication of his remarks and he himself said that he had voted Labour. Given the narrowness of the result, that may have been a crucial effect.

Now, the Labour Party’s manifesto in 1974 demanded various changes in the European Communities and said that it was going to seek a fundamental re-negotiation of Britain’s membership, and the purpose of that was to hold the Labour Party together.

The new Foreign Secretary, the Labour Foreign Secretary, was James Callaghan, and a civil servant in the Foreign Office gave him a briefing paper, rather pro-Europe, and he gave it to him with some trepidation, thinking he might be banished to Ulan Bator as a result or something of that kind, but Callaghan said to him, “They tell me, Michael, that you really care about Europe. Well, that is alright, as long as you remember that I really care about the Labour Party.” That was his major aim.
Now, what did “a fundamental re-negotiation” mean? The first, and most important, issue was: did it mean amending the Treaty of Rome? That is the way the ‘anti-marketeers’ interpreted the phrase, to end some of the principled objections that the British had to membership of Europe, in particular perhaps the Common Agricultural Policy. Now, in my view, the other Member States would not have agreed to that. But Callaghan and the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, made absolutely clear, at the beginning, that they did not mean amending the Treaty of Rome, and what they meant by “fundamental re-negotiation” was improving the terms that Britain had within the scope of the existing treaties.

This, of course, could be an issue in any referendum in 2017: what does David Cameron mean by “a new general settlement”? Does he mean a change in the Treaties or does he mean a settlement within the existing treaties? You can be sure that issue will arouse great problems, though I think more in the Conservative Party than in the Labour Party.

But, in that time, it was the Labour Party, and Callaghan told people in the Foreign Office that he was intending to “negotiate to succeed”, in other words, that both he and Harold Wilson wanted to keep Britain in the European Communities.

In the October 1974 Manifesto, the Labour Party – there was a second election in which Labour won a small overall majority of three in 1974. They attacked what they called “the Tory terms of entry”, which they said had involved “the imposition of food taxes on top of rising world prices, crippling fresh burdens on our balance of payments, and a draconian curtailment of the power of the British Parliament to settle questions affecting vital British interests”. But, nevertheless, the tone was very positive, and the manifesto contained what I think is a very clever politicians’ trick, to raise an extreme and improbable threat to make clear that Labour’s attitude was positive because the manifesto said this: “Labour is an internationalist party and Britain is a European nation, but...”

Now, on the main issues, the other members of the European Community, and in particular the French, who were the leaders, broadly, in this, were prepared to accept minor micro changes and cosmetic changes, provided that the main principles of the Treaty of Rome, and in particular the Common Agricultural Policy, was not questioned, so the British Government had to accept that.

The British Government achieved minor changes to benefit New Zealand, the dairy industries of New Zealand in particular, and Commonwealth sugar, but the main benefit they achieved was an improvement in the budget settlement. You may remember that the budget arrangements worked against Britain’s interests because they benefited those countries with large agricultural sectors, particularly France and Italy, and harmed countries like Britain, which had to import most of their food, and it seemed that Britain was paying much more than her GNP would warrant. So, it was agreed that the arrangements for the budget should take account of a country’s GNP and that, under certain conditions, there would be repayments to countries which were paying out of balance with their GNP. There was a so-called “corrective mechanism” adopted. Now, this corrective mechanism was limited because, if Britain was to pay less, other countries would have to pay more, and in particular Germany, which was then the richest country, perhaps it still is, in the European Community, would have to pay more, so there were limits to what was to be accepted. But the European Community maintained the principle that this was not a special exception for Britain but would apply to all countries whose contributions got out of kilter with their GNP. Now, I think this was done with a certain amount of goodwill, but in practice, it proved not helpful and Britain gained nothing out of it, as it turned out, and the whole matter had to be re-negotiated again by Margaret Thatcher in 1984, with the Fontainebleau Agreement. But, at the time, it was thought, and perhaps reasonably thought, that Britain would get some benefits out of it.

The re-negotiations were completed in March 1975, and Harold Wilson said that it was not – perfectly reasonably – it was not claimed that the objectives set out in the manifesto had been fully met, but there had been considerable and unexpected success in many fields. Now, they had not achieved a fundamental re-negotiation, if that meant amending the Treaties – that was probably never achievable. But they said, perhaps with some
exaggeration, that the improvements gained were in marked contrast to the terms obtained by the previous Administration, and the Labour Party claimed they had shown that the European Communities were not as rigid as some thought, they were flexible, and they were not all determined to do Britain down, and that, if there was clear injustice to one Member State, such as Britain, the others were prepared to listen to the arguments.

Before the re-negotiation, the Cabinet had been divided, roughly equally – there had been 12 in favour of Britain remaining and 11 against. But, after the re-negotiations, the figures changed to 16 for and 7 against. It was agreed that, in the referendum campaign, the 7 against could make their case – there was an agreement to differ. The Cabinet would not be bound by collective solidarity on the issue. The 7 included the main leaders of the left-wing of the Labour Party – Michael Foot, later Party Leader, Tony Benn, Barbara Castle, and also a leading figure of the right, Peter Shore. This was of course an innovation.

The Labour Party in Parliament narrowly voted against British membership – 145 Labour MPs voted against and 137 for. The Labour Party in the country voted very heavily against, the Labour Party Conference two to one against, so the Government was at odds with its own supporters and there was a real danger of a split. The Labour Party rejected the re-negotiated terms by two to one.

But of course, the issue was not “Do you approve of the re-negotiated terms – what do you think of the budget arrangements or the special arrangements for New Zealand?” The real issue was the issue of principle: do you want to stay in or do you want to go out?

Shortly before the re-negotiation had been completed, a Gallup poll in January 1975 showed 55% wanting to leave and 45% wanting to stay. But then Gallup asked the following question: “If the Government negotiated new terms for Britain’s membership of the Common Market, and they thought it was in Britain’s interests to remain a member, how would you vote then, to stay in or leave?” The answer then was 71% to stay in and 29% to leave. That almost pre-figured the actual result of the referendum. So, it is clear that people could be greatly influenced by what the political leaders, in particular the leaders of the Labour Party, said about it. This, I think, begins to answer the key question of why the polls swung back from their hostility to Europe to a positive vote, and why public opinion swung back.

Now, opinion polls show that whenever issues in Britain are issues of procedure, not of substance, which, broadly, constitutional issues are, they have low political salience for the British public, that the British public are not very interested in constitutional issues, sadly for the sale of my books... Now, they are interested in matters of substance, and abstractions, such as sovereignty, tend not to weigh with people when making their decisions.

The main issue of substance in 1975 was the question of food prices and, already, prices had been rising heavily, and that was not only due to membership of the Common Market but also the effects of the Yom Kippur War in late 1973. There were already mountains of unused agricultural products in Europe which could not be sold at the high prices of the European Community and tended to be dumped in Russia or Eastern Europe. There were 500,000 tonnes of milk powder in Europe and over 200,000 tonnes of butter, the so-called butter mountain.

People believed, according to opinion poll evidence, that food prices would go up if we stay in, but, remarkably, they tended not to blame the Common Market for the rise in food prices. In a poll, they were asked what the main causes were, and 64% said they were due to worldwide price rises, 47% said they were due to the trade unions pushing up wages and the cost of living, and only 17% said the Common Market. So, the food price issue never really got off the ground for the anti, and therefore they could not seem to make anything of it.

Now, the history of referendums tends to show that the status quo tends to become more attractive as the day for decision draws nearer, and this means that those who favour radical change must want it very much indeed to get it through. So, the pro-Europeans had a strong argument for the status quo: we were already in Europe – it was defence of the status quo. The result might have been different if they had asked, “Do you want to join?” in 1972, but we were already in – “Do you want to leave?” And, given the economic instability and difficulties in Britain, the fear factor proved very important, and one European Commissioner, Christopher Soames, said, “This is no time for Britain to be considering leaving a Christmas club, let alone the Common Market.” This reflected an underlying feeling in the country of fear. The opponents of the European Community would say that it reflected a loss of national self-confidence that Britain could solve her own problems, on her own, without Europe, but caution and fear were two fundamental factors.

One of the opinion pollsters working for the pro-European campaign said: “Apart from the leadership aspect, the main factors underlying the present majority in favour of continued membership form a vague amalgam of caution and conservatism. We have not managed to generate much enthusiasm or to appeal successfully to more idealistic motives.

Now, there was also a tremendous imbalance in the resources available to the two sides in the referendum because business and the City were almost 100% in support of Europe, and almost all the money and press support came for the pros. The pros had about 10 times as much money as the ants.

No major newspaper supported the “no” campaign, you will be surprised to hear, and amongst the strongest pro newspapers were the Daily Mail and the Daily Express. Indeed, the Daily Mail said our food supplies would be
in danger if we did not remain in Europe. The only paper that was against was the Morning Star, which was a communist paper.

But perhaps the most important effect was the leadership effective, the credibility of the leaders who favoured remaining in, and it seems that, at that time at least, people took their cues from the political leaders they most trusted because the issues were complicated, and all three party leaders were in favour of remaining in, a very rare conjunction. One of the antis, Barbara Castle, said in her memoirs she was putting the case to a lady in her constituency against membership and the lady said, “Well, I have heard what you have said, but Mr Wilson takes a very different view,” although, interestingly enough, Harold Wilson’s wife, Mary, who is still alive as it happens, in her nineties, was anti and voted against remaining in.

Now, who was for remaining in? Well, the three party leaders, the ex-Prime Minister Edward Heath, and various politicians who, at that time, were enormously popular – Roy Jenkins, William Whitelaw and Shirley Williams.

Who was against? Enoch Powell, very popular with some but very unpopular with others; Tony Benn; Michael Foot; Ian Paisley, who said the Virgin Mary is the Madonna of the Common Market; the National Front, the predecessor of the British National Party; the Communist Party; and the main trade union leaders, who were bitterly unpopular.

The best known pro Market figures had a strong positive rating, but the antis had a strong negative rating, particularly the trade union leaders, and the antis were identified, perhaps unfairly, with the extreme left. What happened was, in the words of one Conservative commentator, was the extent to which the referendum was not really about Europe at all. It became a straight left versus right battle, with the normal dividing line shifting further over to the left than in general elections, hence the Labour split and their discomfiture. “In all the speeches I made to Conservative audiences, the trump card was always: “Beware of Benn, Foot and Castle.” It was this, more than anything, which increasingly negating the effects of the anti-European Conservatives.” So, the fear factor was working again, not only the fear of what would happen economically if we voted no but fears of the kinds of politicians it would benefit, fears of extremism.

At the final rally of the Britain in Europe campaign, Roy Jenkins said: “For Britain to leave now would be to go into an old people’s home for fading nations. I do not think it would be a very comfortable old people’s home. I do not like the look of some of the prospective wardens.”

Now, before 1974, many Labour voters might have voted against Europe because it seemed a Conservative policy, Edward Heath’s policy, but by 1975, a Labour voter could say, now the Labour Government is in favour of Europe, and Conservatives could not easily oppose a policy to which Margaret Thatcher and Edward Heath both supported. The main opponent from the right was Enoch Powell, who many Conservatives felt had betrayed the Party in 1974 by advocating a Labour vote. So, this was a left/right issue, broadly speaking, but putting the right, centre and moderate left against the extreme left.

Harold Wilson, who, although a supporter of Europe, was never a real enthusiast, he said: “After the referendum, the main reason for voting yes was that victory for no would empower the wrong kind of people in Britain, the Benn left and the Powell right, who were often extreme nationalists, protectionists, xenophobic and backward-looking.”

It is difficult to argue that the majority was a majority for Europe, that it showed enthusiasm for Europe, and people took their cues from the Establishment – the political leaders, the business and financial leaders, the whole political class, if you like – and it was seen as one of moderates versus extremists, and when it was framed in that way, the ants had no chance. The overwhelming importance in the referendum was the established party cues in deciding voting behaviour. It is worth asking whether that would happen today when the political class, and of course the bankers, are much more discredited than they were then.

The antis were, as I said, Powell, whose following was a largely working class Tory following, and the left of the Labour Party, the trade union leaders - the anti-Establishment, with a large working class following, I think, and united by English nationalism.

Now, you had a very similar phenomenon in Norway, which was voting at about the same time, and in Norway, the “no”s unexpectedly won, although all the party leaders favoured “yes”, because the referendum campaign came rise to an attack on the Establishment, and new leadership outside the established politicians, new movements coming from the grassroots opposed to Europe, a kind of Farage phenomenon in Norway, if you like, 40 years before Farage in Britain. The interesting question is why it did not arise then, given the difficulties the British economy was in, and whether that sort of movement would arise today in a new referendum.

Enoch Powell tried hard to arouse it. He said “The British people were told that they must take the advice of the people who know best, so let us look at the record of these people who know best,” he said, “who can tell you what will be good for Britain, not just this year or next year, but for generations to come. We discover that these are the very people who have always been wrong. Not once horse they have tipped has ever won!”
But it failed, and it is remarkable, given the economic difficulties, given the alienation from politics beginning to be shown, given the failure to solve economic problems, the referendum did not produce an anti-Establishment campaign. It did in Norway. Now, would it do so today in Britain? This is a question perhaps worth considering.

The referendum, as I have said, was a result of party considerations and needs, and its outcome was broadly determined by party, and perhaps the issue was not really one of Europe at all but a question of which party you supported and which leaders you supported. One study of the referendum has said that its verdict was unequivocal but it was also unenthusiastic. Support for membership was wide, but it did not run deep. The referendum was a vote for the status quo, not necessarily an expression of confidence that Europe was a good thing, but fear of what would happen if we left, like the Christmas club argument.

Many people now say, and have said, in recent years, that they were deceived in voting “yes” because they thought they were voting for a free-trade area and nothing more, that they were conned because Europe is more than a free-trade area. Were they deceived?

Edward Heath, in his first speech as a backbencher after losing the Conservative leadership, in the House of Commons, said this: “The European Community was founded for a political purpose, not a party purpose, not even a federal purpose, as some would argue. The political purpose was to absorb the new Germany into the structure of the European family, and economic means were adopted for that very political purpose. Today, the issue is still a great political issue.”

A Government pamphlet was sent to every household. It did not mention European union or European monetary union, but that was not deceitful because, at that time, they were merely aspirations, not even concrete proposals. It did mention sovereignty and the need to share it. It mentioned NATO. But it did not say that the European Union was a superior legal order and so different in kind from other international organisations such as NATO, nor did it explicitly state that European Union legislation was superior to Westminster and could not be repealed or amended by Westminster. It did emphasise the national veto which then existed. It said that no important new policy could be decided in Brussels or anywhere else without the consent of a British Minister, answerable to a British Government and a British Parliament – and that was right at that time.

The anti pamphlet sent round to every household said that European law was superior to Westminster, but it said that the Common Market sets out, by stages, to merge Britain with France, Germany, Italy and other countries into a single nation, which seems to me absurd.

One of the critics of Europe, Enoch Powell, accepted that the referendum had been about sovereignty. He said this: “I am convinced that, in this referendum, the vast majority of those voting had no notion that they were saying yes or no to Britain continuing as a nation at all.” But then he said: “The fault did not lie with many of the advocates of British membership, who declared continually that the nation state was obsolete and that Britain therefore must become a province in a new European state and cease to be a self-governing nation.” Now, that exaggerates the case made by the pros, but he did accept that the debate had been about sovereignty and that the antis had lost that debate.

It seems to me that people could have found out, had they wished to do so, what the European Community was, and that the whole purpose and point of the referendum was to enable the people to participate.

Now, what was the effect of the referendum? The first was that it legitimised our membership of the European Community, and I think it could not have been legitimised any other way. One of Harold Wilson’s advisors said that Edward Heath took the Establishment into Europe, but Harold Wilson took the people into Europe. Perhaps, today, the Establishment remain in Europe but the people do not. David Cameron said, in his Bloomberg speech last January, that consent was wafer-thin, and perhaps that is the case for having another referendum.

The result, in large part, I think, was due to the political skill of Harold Wilson. The day after the referendum, Wilson said to his Private Secretary: “People say I have no strategy, cannot think strategically.” He both kept Britain in Europe and avoided a split in the Labour Party. He did not follow the precedent of Robert Peel, who had broken his party on the Corn Laws, or Gladstone, who had broken his party on home rule. Europe, arguably, was the cause of Edward Heath’s defeat, it destroyed Margaret Thatcher, it helped ruin John Major’s Government, it may ruin Cameron’s Government, we do not know. Harold Wilson, I think almost uniquely, triumphed over Europe, at least in the short run.

He says in his memoirs: “To bridge a deep political chasm without splitting a party or provoking dramatic ministerial resignations is sometimes regarded as something approaching political chicanery. The highest aim of leadership is to secure policies adequate to deal with any situation, without major confrontations, splits and resignations. It may be bad for the headlines and news placards, but it has been sought and achieved by our greatest leaders, Conservative as well as Liberal or Labour – Baldwin, Macmillan, Churchill. I always sought consensus. It is sometimes galling to be criticised for achieving it.”

The outcome seemed at the time fortunate because it was clear and indisputable, an endorsement of the view of the majority in the Cabinet, with a large majority, on a high turnout, and with a majority for staying in in Scotland
Tony Benn said: “I have just been in receipt of a very big message from the British people. I read it loud and clear. By an overwhelming majority, the British people have voted to stay in, and I am sure everybody would want to accept that. That had been the principle of all of us who advocated the referendum.”

Harold Wilson said: “A verdict has been given by a bigger vote, by a bigger majority, than has been received by any Government, in any General Election. Nobody in Britain or the wider world should have any doubt about its meaning. It was a free vote, without constraint, following a free democratic campaign, conducted constructively and without rancour. It means that 14 years of national argument are over.”

Now, you will see that the long-term results of the referendum were not what people thought in 1975, and I end with some paradoxes...

The first is, the referendum was meant to hold the Labour Party together, but in the referendum campaign, figures of the Labour right, such as Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams, worked with leading Liberals, such as David Steel, and they found that they had more in common with the Liberals than with people on the Labour left, because the referendum publicly exposed Labour’s differences. It showed really that Labour was two parties: a party on the right which was pro-European, and a party on the left which was anti-European. That did not seem to matter in the short run. The Party held together while in government. But, after its defeat in 1979, the row came back, and the referendum campaign, I think, prefigured the split in the Labour Party in 1981, when the Gang of Four, led by Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams, broke off to form the SDP, which, in 1988, merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats. So, you may say, perhaps the referendum helped not to unite the Labour Party but to split it, and that the Liberal/SDP alliance was one consequence of it.

Now, Harold Wilson said it is the end of 14 years of national argument – it was not. It meant to end the argument for good, but people said they were not told the truth, and perhaps there is the assumption in that that the job of politicians is to spoon-feed the public and the voters themselves had no responsibility to find out anything about the issues, which is an anti-democratic assumption, it seems to me.

But, by 1980, Tony Benn was advocating that Britain should leave the European Community, without a further referendum, and that was Labour’s policy in 1983, under Michael Foot’s leadership – the manifesto committed a Labour Government to leaving Europe without a referendum.

So, the referendum settled the European issue only for a very short period, and of course it raises the question of whether it really was a ringing endorsement of Europe or what you might say a shadow referendum, because the real question was not “Should we stay in Europe?” but “Which set of leaders do we really trust?” Perhaps people were answering a different question to the one that they were being asked.

What are the lessons for today? The first is the Europe, and it remains so, Europe remains a low salience issue. Immigration is a high salience issue, but Europe, a low salience issue, and that means that opinion on Europe can switch very rapidly, and that there is no guarantee in a referendum that people will be voting on Europe rather than on some other question or issue. The voting may be greatly influenced by what the leaders and politicians trusted by the public recommend. It is possible the politicians, if they say they have achieved a successful re-negotiation, even if they have not, voters may vote “yes”, as they did in 1975, and they will be voting not on the re-negotiations, on the amendments to Article XXXVII, but they will be following the cues of their political leaders. And perhaps it might be easier for the Euro-sceptic Conservatives to convince the public, just as it was for Labour in 1975. Had the Conservatives been in government then, Labour in opposition would almost certainly have called for a “no” vote, and many Labour voters would have voted “no”, in large numbers.

But of course, the key question for today is whether what you might call the political and financial Establishment can still pull it off or whether they are so discredited by expenses and other scandals, and by economic difficulties, that people will no longer follow their cues, whether the anti-Establishment campaign that Enoch Powell tried in vain to summon up in 1975 could succeed today, perhaps under the leadership of Nigel Farage and UKIP.

Well, it is difficult enough for the historian to find out what happened in the past, let alone to predict the future, but perhaps I might end by reminding you of what Roy Jenkins, perhaps rather incautiously, said when asked to explain the massive “yes” victory in 1975. He said: “The people took the advice of people they were used to following.” This leaves open the following large question: what happens when, on Europe, the public are no longer prepared to take the advice of “those they are used to following”? I will try to answer that question in my next and final lecture...

Thank you.