



*41 years ago – the first Brexit debate*

The current debate about the Brexit and the referendum on the UK staying in the EU scheduled for 23 June 2016 is really a *déjà-vu*. Almost the same debate was raging in 1975. The Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath had negotiated the British accession to what was called then the European Community in 1973 (see the question on the ballot paper). The following year, however, his government fell over the miners' strikes. The election campaign was run and won by Labour on the promise to 'renegotiate' the terms of membership – does that ring a bell? – and hold a referendum.

As a matter of fact, nothing really changed in the Labour version of the terms of British membership as compared to the original version of accession to the EC negotiated by the Conservative Government under Heath.

This becomes very clear in a statement made by Margaret Thatcher as the new leader of the Conservative Opposition, in which she agrees with actually everything that the new Labour Prime Minister says about the conditions of British EC membership:

Is the Prime Minister [Harold Wilson] aware that we welcome his decision to recommend that we stay in the Common Market? We also welcome his statement that it has not been necessary to change a single clause in the basic treaties to carry out these negotiations, that they have all been completed within the existing terms and that, presumably, in due course of time, there will be other improvements also within the existing terms, in the normal course of events. Is he aware that we also welcome his statement that practically all Commonwealth countries wish us to stay in the Common Market and his statement that the special relationship of this country with the United States will not be changed in any way but that it is his intention to strengthen it?<sup>1</sup>

Against this (harmonious) background the referendum was held on 5 June 1975. 67.23 % voted 'YES', and Britain stayed in. At least for the next 41 years.

The historical precedent shows very nicely a recurrent pattern in British politics. The Opposition likes to use 'Europe' as a stick against the Government, mainly because they do not have to take governmental responsibilities. In Britain European politics has always been a subject of domestic contestation – not like in France or Germany, where the major parties have over decades formed a consensus in favour of European integration.

Thatcher's metamorphosis from a supporter of the European Community, as proclaimed in the quote above, to the 'Iron Lady' hand bagging her European partners to get her 'money back' is one of those stunning changes of heart which happen to British politicians over European integration once they get into power.

*Best Wishes, Thomas*

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Thatcher (Con), Weekly Hansard 993, 18 MARCH 1975, 1467-8