

Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe! The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain*

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After the 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union, Robert Saunders' book on the 1975 referendum – in which British voters preferred by a margin of two to one to remain in – makes for gripping reading. The book does not focus on diplomacy or high-level political negotiation, but uses the 1975 referendum as a lens through which to examine political culture and British society in the 1970s.

The first section of the book examines how the referendum came about. Here Saunders illuminates why the European issue was so difficult to contain or solve within party structures. It was contentious for both parties, but even more so for Labour than for the Conservatives. In the early 1970s, Harold Wilson managed to strike a precarious balance within his party in order to keep the issue under control, but this act of political tightrope-walking was no longer possible after the Heath government fell in early 1974. This paved the way for the referendum, and the book's second chapter examines how a constitutional innovation which had been viewed with scepticism in British constitutional thinking came to be adopted. Here, Saunders refutes the common view that Wilson's decision to hold a referendum was merely another tactical manoeuvre to get himself out of a tight corner. Rather, Saunders emphasises that Wilson would not have been able to argue for and get a referendum had it not been for the increasingly compelling arguments made, from a variety of quarters, for a referendum. Saunders also offers a revisionist take on the renegotiations which took place from 1974-5. Where these have often been presented as a sham, Saunders emphasises that they had a precise strategic purpose for Wilson. The goal was not to fundamentally change the nature of the European Economic Community, but to signal a change of direction, in order that Labour voters could safely change their minds about the Community. And in this, the renegotiation succeeded.

The final two chapters of the book's first section anatomise the groups that led the in and out campaigns: Britain in Europe (BIE), and the National Referendum Campaign (NRC). The contrasts are striking. BIE was highly professional, with many political stars, who mostly worked well together, and a large funding stream. The organisation made an effort to mobilise the party machines in order to get out the vote. It constructed a multi-vocal campaign, recruiting national champions and 'ordinary' spokespeople to try to make remaining in Europe seem like the common sense choice. The NRC was quite the opposite: it had little money, few big stars, and was often amateurish and poorly organised. Its different supporters often hated each other and wanted to get out for conflicting reasons. The stage is set for the resounding victory of BIE.

The second and third sections of the book leave Westminster to examine how the debate played out when BIE and the NRC took their arguments to diverse groups around the country. Saunders reinserts the churches into the story of the referendum, arguing that their absence from most existing narratives reflects historiographical preoccupations with 'secularisation' which are not borne out by examination of the churches' important role – noisy, idealistic, and ecumenical – in the debate in 1975. He shows how concerted were the efforts made by business to fund and argue for the case for Europe, and argues that trade unions were largely unable to make the opposite case effectively because Europe was generally low on workers' lists of priorities, and because workers were more likely to look to Wilson's leadership than that of their shop stewards on such an issue. Saunders also examines gender, asking why the NRC's early lead among women voters was

squandered. While the reasons for this were complex, one important factor was the lack of attention the NRC paid to women. Saunders also argues, though, that the predominant focus of BIE's appeals to women on 'traditional' issues like the cost of food reflected women's 'continuing status as a "special category", outside the perceived mainstream of electoral politics' (185).

One of the few women's groups which did support the NRC was the British League of Housewives, which by the 1970s was mainly concerned with 'solidarity with the white colonies' and 'resistance to Marxism' (207), a fact which is telling about the ways in which the referendum was tied up with culture wars that found a wellspring in the end of empire. These themes are explored further in chapters on the complex interplay between ideas about empire, Britain's world role and the European Community, and on the question of sovereignty. Quite unlike in 2016, Saunders argues that BIE entered the referendum campaign believing that it could win the intellectual battle over the question of sovereignty, but it largely dropped the issue after finding that it resonated with few voters. They were more interested in the questions of jobs and inflation. The interplay of economic interests and cultural, national or confessional identities is also anatomised in chapters on the referendum debate in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Saunders shows how the SNP's and Plaid Cymru's calls to leave the EEC were largely unheeded, with majorities in both Scotland and Wales voting to Remain, paving the way for both nationalist parties to decide that the European project would be, in fact, key to making independence work. In Northern Ireland the politics of the referendum was complex, but there was a narrow victory for Remain, shaped by the fact that economics played a significant role in the debate, overshadowing constitutional arguments and confessional loyalties.

Yes to Europe! shows that attitudes towards Europe were very often shaped not so much by Europe as by other issues and beliefs – the end of Empire, Women's Lib, nationalism(s), or secularisation – making the referendum campaign a lens onto a whole array of themes within the political, social and cultural history of Britain. The book is also highly relevant to current debates: for example, questions about the place of experts and elites in British politics, so key in the 2016 referendum, run through the book.

Saunders tells a gripping story in wonderful prose. He conjures lurid but perfectly expressive metaphors, as when he describes the ballot paper as 'a political Rorschach test, with responses ranging from nightmare to nirvana' (23), or Enoch Powell as 'a political meteor, who blazed across the firmament of British politics in a spectacular and sustained act of self-immolation' (53), or when he explains that in the mid-1970s, the Community seemed to be dropping ideas that were unpalatable to Britain: '[t]he ghosts of EMU and European Union had been exorcized; it would be years before the ectoplasm of "ever closer union" began once more to drip from the ceiling of the Cabinet Room' (84). This excellent book deserves to be very widely read.

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