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Reinventing Britain:
British National Identity and the European Economic Community, 1967-1975

J. Meade Klingensmith

Candidate for Senior Honors in History
Leonard V. Smith, Thesis Advisor
Submitted Spring 2012

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Preface/Acknowledgments

The thesis that you are now reading is substantially different from the one that I set out to write a year ago. I originally wanted to write about European integration. I, like many idealists before me, thought of regional political integration as the next step in the progression of civilization. I viewed the European Union as the first (relatively) successful experiment toward that end and wanted to conduct a study that would explore the problems associated with nations sacrificing their sovereignty and national identities in the name of integration, with the hope of exploring how those problems have been overcome in the past.

Great Britain, as one of the European Union's most prominent-yet-ambivalent members, jumped out to me as the perfect potential case study. I was fascinated by Prime Minister Harold Wilson's attempt to convince Britons that joining with Europe was the right decision, by his potential kamikaze tactic of letting Britons decide for themselves in the country's first-ever national referendum in 1975, and by their ultimate decision to stay in Europe despite decades of widespread resistance. Britain's relationship with Europe was by no means smooth sailing after that; its refusal to be a part of the Eurozone was the most prominent example of British ambivalence. Nevertheless, the fact was that in 1975 Britons were given the choice to leave the European Community - something that they had largely been clamoring for since they joined - and they turned it down. I wanted to understand why, and I hoped to illuminate the issue by contrasting it with Wilson's earlier failed attempt at convincing Britons that their future was with Europe in 1967. As such, the basic structure of this

thesis was decided from the beginning, but due in large part to the events of the past year its purpose has significantly changed.

At almost the very moment that I began researching this thesis, rumblings began to emerge about out-of-control debt in Greece and elsewhere in Europe. Over the next few months, the Eurozone crisis exploded. Old wounds were reopened. The British press was full of stories denouncing the European Union – both the irresponsible practices that led to the crisis and the new austerity measures being proposed by Germany in exchange for financial support. As I researched Britain’s public debates over Europe in 1967 and 1975, I was struck by how similar the discourse was between then and now. My time researching in London in January 2012 reinforced this opinion. When mentioning to someone what I was researching, I was almost always met with an incensed “*I’ll tell you what we think about the EU...*” The subsequent reviews were rarely glowing, and mirrored the language used in 1967 and 1975 to a startling degree. The issues that I was researching were still alive and well. It seemed that little had changed since 1967 in the way that Britons thought about Europe.

Around that time, I realized that when I set out to write this thesis I had started with the wrong question. Before asking “why do states integrate,” I first had to understand national identity. How are national identities formed? How are they shifted? Once set, can they ever really be changed? What is the role of history in that process? The following pages represent my attempt to grapple with those questions.

This thesis owes a great debt to many people in my life. The first and most important group must be my family and friends. I would be lost without the support and love that they provide. I am particularly indebted to my older sister Katie. I never

would have learned to push myself if I had not been constantly driven to compete with her brilliance throughout my childhood, and as an adult I count her as one of my dearest friends. She is also now a doctor, which is neither here nor there, but I enjoy bragging about it. Thanks as well to my housemate and good friend Joe Leffler, a fellow history thesis writer. As comrades-in-arms, we bounced ideas off each other until there were no more to bounce.

I owe my deepest thanks to Leonard V. Smith, my advisor and mentor throughout this process. His guidance, his support, his feedback, his high standards, and his willingness to challenge my ideas and point me in different directions with a smile on his face have all been invaluable to this project and to my wider life. It has been an absolute privilege to work with him. Finally, thank you to Renee Romano, whose Historical Memory course sparked a passion and shaped many of the ideas in this thesis, and whose Honors seminar (and its accompanying baked goods) kept me and every other thesis writer on-track and sane over the past year.

Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role.

-Dean Acheson, 1963

Introduction

“One Tiny, Damp Little Island”

*Poor loves. Trained to Empire, trained to rule the waves. All gone. All taken away.
Bye-bye, world.*

-John Le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, 1974

Beginning with the massive success of *From Russia with Love*, published in 1957, Ian Fleming became Britain’s premiere adventure novelist. His hero, James Bond, captured the British imagination by offering what historian David Cannadine called a cocktail of “great-power nostalgia, imperial escapism and national reassurance” at a time when British power was on the decline.¹ In Fleming’s novels, the endlessly capable Bond made a career out of upstaging the blustering Americans, represented by Bond’s counterpart Felix Leiter. Bond – and by extension Great Britain – kept the West together in secret while the Americans did all the talking.² This escapist fantasy acted as a tonic to the British nation which, in the wake of World War II, saw its empire begin to crumble, its economy falter, and its national pride erode. Countless Britons indulged in this fantasy, and for many it was no fantasy at all; to them, Britain still *was* a great power, waiting in the wings for a moment of national renewal. The Bond narrative, however, was not without its alternatives.

By the 1970s, former intelligence officer John Le Carré had displaced Ian Fleming as Britain’s premiere spy novelist. Where Fleming’s world was a projected fantasy of continued British global relevance, Le Carré’s characters represented a generation of

¹ David Cannadine, *In Churchill’s Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 281

² *ibid*, p. 304

individuals becoming disillusioned with that same fantasy. At the height of his popularity, beginning with 1963's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and culminating in the 1974 release of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Le Carré wrote a series of novels that featured members of the World War II generation coming to terms with Britain's declining world role and accompanying moral decay. Britons were raised to believe that *they* occupied a special place in the world because *their Empire* occupied a special place in the world; if the latter were no longer true, neither was the former. What, Le Carré asked, did it mean to be a Briton in an era when the traditional conception of British identity was gone? That question tore apart Le Carré's characters. Some committed suicide; some became Soviet spies; some plugged away at meaningless bureaucratic desk jobs and led unfulfilled lives. All of them served to illustrate the dangers that faced Britain if its national identity remained stuck in the past.

The progression from Fleming to Le Carré as Britain's novelist *du jour* accurately reflected the shift in the way that Britons viewed themselves which took place during the 1960s and 1970s. From the end of World War II until the 1970s, Winston Churchill's narrative of World War II as Britain's "Finest Hour" dominated British national identity. The narrative argued that by standing up to Hitler when the rest of Europe fell, Britons reasserted that they were a unique people with a history of greatness, even if they lost their empire. If they continued to keep calm and carry on, as the iconic posters that peppered London during the blitz advised, they would persevere over any challenge. Unfortunately for Britons, time proved this narrative to be divorced from reality. By embracing a national identity that emphasized going it alone – a national identity in denial of the realities of the present – Britain risked dooming itself to true international

irrelevance. Keeping calm and carrying on had achieved Britons nothing in the past two decades. By the 1970s they were ready for something new.

This work examines the moment that Britons – political leaders and common citizens alike – finally undertook the painful process of forging a new national identity to fit a changed world. The event that forced this shift in identity was the British application for entry into the European Economic Community (EEC). Often referred to in Britain as the Common Market, the EEC was at its heart a free trade zone in Western Europe that sought to build up Europe as a financially independent bloc of countries that could act as a counterweight to the bipolar Cold War world order dominated by the United States in the West and the Soviet Union in the East. Though it was primarily an economic arrangement in the 1960s and 1970s, from the outset its founders envisioned it as laying the groundwork for a lasting political union in Western Europe. This, more than its economic policies, was Britain's primary objection to the EEC in the organization's early years.

Britain's process of joining the EEC was long and contentious. The UK first applied to the EEC under Harold MacMillan's Conservative Party government in 1963. However, France's nationalistic President Charles DeGaulle, convinced that Britain was a puppet of the United States and would therefore undermine the intended independence of the EEC, vetoed British entry. This turn of events was much to the relief of most of the British public. EEC entry was viewed as a betrayal of all that was British – the sovereignty of the Queen in Parliament and the independence of Britain as a politically and culturally separate entity from continental Europe.

In 1967, Britain applied to the EEC again under the Labour government of Harold Wilson. This time, however, the debate was different. That is to say, there *was* a debate. Public resistance to joining the EEC was still widespread, and was even more ferocious than before. The notion of joining the EEC fundamentally challenged nearly every aspect of the makeshift national identity to which Britons had been clinging since the end of World War II. Nevertheless, there were a great many voices in support of the EEC as well. For the moment it did not matter, as De Gaulle again vetoed Britain's application. Britain finally entered the EEC in 1972 – after both De Gaulle and Wilson were no longer in power – under the leadership of the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath. The legwork, however, had been done under Wilson.

Then in 1975, Harold Wilson, back in office as Prime Minister, held the first public referendum in British history. The question: should the United Kingdom remain in the EEC under renegotiated terms? The referendum, although constitutionally non-binding in the UK where sovereignty lies not with the public but with Parliament, was a material manifestation of Wilson's argument it was ultimately up to the British public to decide what sort of nation Britain would become. The real question at the heart of the 1975 referendum was much broader than contention over a trade agreement. It was more important than Britain's traditions and institutions. The referendum asked: "What is Britain? Is it the same nation that it has always been, or could it finally become something new?" In 1975 the British public overwhelmingly voted in favor of something new. By a majority of 67.2%, they voted to stay in the EEC.

In examining the shift in British identity that was revealed by the EEC debates of the 1960s and 1970s, this thesis will take snapshots of the two most revealing moments

of that process: the 1967 public debate and the 1975 referendum. The 1967 debate was the point at which Britain's "Finest Hour" identity was challenged most directly and fought back the hardest. As such, it serves as a perfect window into the nature of that identity at its highest tide. The 1975 debate was the counter-point, the moment when the old identity was definitively cast aside in favor of a new identity closer to Europe, albeit only for that moment. Together, these two debates served to bookend Britain's identity crisis. By analyzing only these two moments rather than presenting a narrative that links them together, this thesis hopes to emphasize how sharply they contrast. It can be viewed as a comparison between two case studies: one in which an old national identity was held in place by the weight of history despite a direct challenge, and one in which the same national identity was successfully challenged by the adoption of a new historical narrative.

As Prime Minister, Harold Wilson was the instigator of both of these moments and played a key role in enabling and encouraging a shift in British national identity. Though his decision to bring Britain into the European Community was based on a pragmatic economic calculus, and though he embraced the 1975 referendum as a means of controlling his own party, once Wilson made up his mind about something he committed absolutely. To convince Britons that joining the EEC was the best option for their future, in 1967 he promoted a narrative of British history that contradicted Churchill's. Churchill's vision of British history – the one that was entrenched in British culture by the 1960s – saw Britain as a unique land apart, having more in common with other English-speaking nations than with the fratricidal Europeans that Britain saved from endless infighting time and again. Wilson's narrative was quite different. For him,

British history was a forward progression from chaos to ever-expanding order. Tribes were replaced by clans, clans by kingdoms, and kingdoms by the United Kingdom. Joining with Europe was simply the next stage in that inevitable evolution. As such, Wilson's desire to bring Britain into Europe was driven by hard statistics, but his argument to the public involved a broad rewrite of British history and a call for a new national identity.

Similarly, Wilson's decision to embrace the 1975 referendum began as a political tactic to keep his party in line, but became a complete reconceptualization of Britons' relationship to their government. In Britain, sovereignty lies with Parliament; the public's only official role is to routinely elect the members of the House of Commons. As Walter Bagehot argued in his influential work *The English Constitution*, this unique form of government was a result of the particular vicissitudes of British history. Bagehot posited that the endurance of Britain's Parliamentary system can be traced to the fact that Britons never stopped viewing the Sovereign as the uniting heart of their nation coupled with a contradictory desire for a more republican government. Thus, "the appendages of a monarchy have been converted into the essence of a republic; only [in Britain], because of a more numerous heterogeneous political population, it is needful to keep the ancient show while we secretly interpolate the new reality."³ A key part of this balancing act is maintaining the tradition that Parliament is elected by the people, but once elected acts with absolute sovereignty. This allows Parliament to make unpopular decisions – and risk dissolution – while the Sovereign remains above the fray and maintains his/her purity as a unifying symbol.

³ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, (Second Edition, 1873), p. 209-210

Wilson did not formally set out to change this; rather, he argued to all who would listen that the results of the 1975 referendum might not be legally binding on Parliament, but that Parliament had to abide by them anyway. The referendum needed no formal constitutional revision to be binding. It represented the will of the people, and the will of the people must come first, regardless of centuries of storied tradition and regardless of the letter of the law. This was a source of major debate in Britain, a nation that takes tradition very seriously. Wilson's argument, however, gave Britons an unprecedented level of direct ownership over their nation and its future. Wilson empowered Britons to take their history into their own hands and use it to decide what their nation could be by asserting that Parliamentary Sovereignty was a bluff; that despite tradition, the spirit of Britain had always lived in the people and Britain's future was theirs to guide.

This thesis argues that a nation's identity creates the framework and parameters in which it can act, that its identity is powerfully shaped by its history, and therefore that history exerts a substantial, concrete force on the present. The past is not merely a backdrop or a tool to be used by canny politicians; it is an independent actor that can be difficult to overcome. It frames the discursive choices available to a population. In Britain, history stood as a major impediment to the British attempt at finding a new place in the world when its old place was lost. After a long, painful struggle, however, Britons were able to resist its pull and turn toward the future, if only for a moment. They did so not by rejecting their history, but by reframing and marshaling it in order to create a new narrative and thus a new national identity. History is sometimes a roadblock and sometimes a tool, but it is always at the heart of national identity.

British National Identity

From the birth of Great Britain in 1707 until World War II, Britain's national identity was rooted in the twin pillars of the British Empire and separation from Europe. In *Britons*, the definitive study of British national identity in the age of empire, historian Linda Colley argues that the Empire left such a lasting mark on the British psyche because it provided material proof of what Britons viewed as their preordained destiny: to lead the world into an age of enlightened civilization.⁴ Britons viewed themselves as chosen by God for this task, and the Empire was their proof. Thus, the existence of the Empire became closely knit with British pride. If the Empire was the proof of Britain's God-given greatness, Britons would lose their greatness should the Empire ever cease to exist.

The other key to traditional British national identity was that it stood in opposition to what Britons saw as a European – and particularly a French – identity. Identities must always be to some extent oppositional; for there to be an in-group, there must be an out-group. As Colley notes, “imagining the French as their vile opposites, as Hyde to their Jekyll, became a way for Britons... to contrive for themselves a converse and flattering identity.”⁵ France was Catholic, so Britain took pride in its Protestantism; France had an absolutist monarchy, so Britain reveled in its constitutional monarchy. This oppositional identity even extended to the form of Britain's empire. Britons felt that their “Empire of the Deep,” a phrase coined by the Scottish poet James Thomson, was more civilized and thus morally superior to the traditional land empires of

⁴ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 368

⁵ Ibid

continental Europe.⁶ These two pillars – the Empire and separation from Europe – defined the British nation for centuries, but they could not last forever. Though Britain escaped from World War II physically unscathed compared to the rest of Europe, the war was not so merciful to British national identity.

The United Kingdom's total war against Nazi Germany marked the British Empire's final stand. To some extent, World War II was a war of choice for the UK. Hitler held the Anglo-Saxon race in high esteem and sought to coexist with Britain, not conquer it. The British Empire could likely have endured for some time longer if it had decided to play along with Nazi Germany. It was a genuine and tempting option, but Britain turned it down. As A. J. P. Taylor remarked in *English History 1914-1945*, the decision to replace Neville Chamberlain with Winston Churchill in 1940 signified the government's conscious decision to defeat Hitler at any cost to Britain. "Victory," Taylor writes, "even if this meant placing the British empire in pawn to the United States; victory, even if it meant Soviet domination of Europe; victory at all costs."⁷ Britain, then, was willing to bargain its empire - its function in the world and thus its very identity - in exchange for defeating Germany. It got exactly what it bargained for.

Rather than embrace the opportunities of an unknown future, in the wake of the war Britons filled the void left by the loss of their Empire with a new myth. The "Finest Hour" myth of World War II, rooted in the rhetoric of Winston Churchill, loomed large in the British imagination. The myth still holds power to this day, though less than it did in the two decades after the war. In fact, it may have been most purely expressed as

⁶ Stephen H. Gregg (ed.), *Empire and Identity: An Eighteenth-Century Sourcebook*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 7

⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 475

recently as 2005 in an episode of the British pop-cultural institution *Doctor Who*.

Visiting London during the Blitz, the Doctor – a time-travelling alien with a distinctly British spirit – rhapsodizes:

Amazing... 1941. Right now, not very far from here, the German war machine is rolling up the map of Europe. Country after country, falling like dominoes. Nothing can stop it. Nothing! Until one tiny, damp little island says, "No! No. Not here." A mouse in front of a lion. You're amazing. The lot of you. Don't know what you do to Hitler, but you frighten the hell out of me.⁸

In redefining their nation as the mouse that defeated the lion, a complete reversal of Britain's representation during the age of the Empire, Britons were able to maintain their belief in the supremacy of the United Kingdom despite a broken empire and waning international influence. They replaced the sprawl of the Empire with a fierce pride in their tiny island that stood tall where larger nations fell. The sun may finally have set on the British Empire, but if Britons' stiff upper lip saw them through the fury of Hitler, it could similarly see them through any trial. Britons became convinced of their self-reliance and wary of tying themselves to any foreign nation or international organization that they did not absolutely control. The "Finest Hour" myth effectively gave Britons a reprieve from having to grapple with the hard question of determining who they would be in a post-Empire world and compelled them to prove their continuing independence.

Their primary tool in this endeavor was the Commonwealth. Britain's trade was by choice dependent on the Commonwealth states – a collection of former colonies that still maintained a free association under the Crown. The Commonwealth was born out of a desire to accommodate colonial calls for independence and international pressure

⁸ Stephen Moffat, *Doctor Who*, "The Empty Child," 2005

to end colonial practices without losing the material benefits of the Empire or the sense of fraternity that Britons felt toward the residents of their former colonies. Britain granted the Commonwealth states independence in exchange for continued symbolic ties and – more importantly – privileged trade agreements. Of these states, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa were most important to the British economy.

The Commonwealth states, however, were growing less dependent on Britain by the year. Independently, they all began to realize that trade with the world's growing economies – particularly the United States, Germany, and Japan – was too lucrative to turn down. They opened their markets to more non-British goods and decreased the proportion of their exports that went to Britain.⁹ Britain's primary export market was shrinking fast, and it did not aggressively pursue new markets to compensate. Britain was failing, and it would continue on its downward spiral as long as it remained convinced that it could go it alone.

The EEC was the primary alternative to continued reliance on the Commonwealth, but by joining with Europe Britain would be destroying the only pillar of its national identity that still stood. After the loss of the Empire, Britain's cultural separation from the rest of Europe was as important to its national identity as ever. For Britons clinging to the myth of their global uniqueness, it was all they had left. World War II further reinforced this narrative by convincing Britons that they had saved Europe from Hitler, and therefore that the Continent was in Britain's debt. As such, the notion of joining the EEC was tantamount to destroying the last tenet of traditional British national identity. Without the EEC, however, Britain's future looked bleak.

⁹ William I. Hitchcock, *The Struggle for Europe*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 223

At this historic juncture, with Britons coming to terms with an old identity lost but fighting against the only plausible vision of their future tooth and nail, I begin this thesis.

Historiographical Discussion

British political history is traditionally biographical, and as such usually reflects some variation of the “Great Man” theory of history. Even the broad surveys, such as A. J. P. Taylor’s above-mentioned *English History 1914-1945*, are generally framed as the story of a series of great individuals and the ways in which they shaped Britain. In these accounts, social forces and national identity are subservient to the men, and occasionally the women, who wielded them. There is a healthy body of British social and cultural history, but it is kept in a separate sphere from the political. The two are rarely allowed to interact or inform one another in British historiography.

Studies that focus on Britain’s entry into the EEC follow this trend. Most of the scholarship on this period comes from two authors: Helen Parr and Melissa Pine. Melissa Pine’s work *Harold Wilson and Europe* begins with De Gaulle’s veto of Britain’s 1967 EEC application and argues that Wilson should be credited with laying the groundwork for Britain’s successful bid in 1972, though it took place during MacMillan’s premiership. Helen Parr’s book *Britain’s Policy Towards the European Community* more directly overlaps with the first half of this study. It focuses on Wilson’s dealings with his Cabinet and the European leaders – particularly De Gaulle – from 1964 to 1967 and argues that Wilson supported the EEC out of a genuine belief in its ideals, not a sly political calculus as is often argued. These two authors came together to write an essay in *The Labour Governments 1964-1970* called “Policy Towards the European Economic

Community,” which acts as a summary and synthesis of their books. The works of Pine and Parr have two primary items on their agenda: they establish a detailed chronology of events at the highest level of government, and they seek to intervene in Harold Wilson’s reputation by showing him to be as dedicated an idealist as he was a canny politician. These are valid concerns, but they have already been addressed and as such will not play a major role here.

Rather, this thesis aims to complicate the story of British political history by adding in issues of national identity, historical memory, and public opinion. Wilson’s actions will be equally balanced with the words of average Britons in order to show the discourse between the halls of power and the politics of the people. National identity constrains the choices available to policymakers, and though elites can influence that identity, it ultimately lives in the public. Politics informs public perception, and public perception shapes politics. This thesis shows by example that to tell the history of one without the other is to tell an incomplete story.

Methodology

In researching this study, I relied on two bodies of primary sources in addition to secondary studies and the memoirs of Harold Wilson. The first of these is the vast quantity of British governmental records available to the public. The Hansard Project collects Parliamentary papers and complete transcripts of every Parliamentary debate from 1803 to 2005. The British National Archives publishes the Cabinet Papers of the government as they are declassified, which by law is thirty years after they were created. All of these sources have been consulted in compiling this thesis.

The second body of sources used – representing the bulk of this study’s original research – is a collection of regional newspapers from throughout Great Britain. This thesis uses the “Letters to the Editor” sections of these papers as a window into the public debate surrounding the EEC in Britain. Historians constantly struggle with accurately assessing the views of the majority of people who do not control the historical narrative. In more modern times the printing press, and now the internet, have made it easier for non-elites to record, distribute, and preserve their words. That said, tuning into the voice of the street is still a challenge. Newspapers that publish letters to the editor are one of the only sources in which the original words of common Britons are preserved in a large volume. As such, this thesis uses them as its primary tool for tapping into public discourse.

The newspapers examined in this thesis were carefully selected in order to provide a wide range of public opinion. They were chosen according to two criteria: geographic variance and political orientation. They represent a sampling of regions from around the United Kingdom and include papers aligned with various points on the political spectrum in order to account for editorial bias in which letters were selected for publication in various papers.¹⁰

Thesis Structure

This thesis begins by exploring Harold Wilson’s shift in opinion on the EEC during his first three years as Prime Minister (1964-1967). It argues that Wilson’s

¹⁰ The following newspapers were primarily used: *The Birmingham Post* (serving the West Midlands area, free market orientation); *The Bristol Evening Post* (serving Greater Bristol, Northern Somerset, and South Gloucestershire, centrist/independent orientation); *The Express & Star* (serving Wolverhampton and the Black Country, Liberal orientation); *The Liverpool Daily Post* (serving Liverpool, Merseyside, Cheshire, and North Wales, center-left orientation); and the *Manchester Evening News* (serving Greater Manchester, leftist orientation).

reversal, from opponent of the EEC to its greatest champion, was the result of a pragmatic economic calculus, but that his public argument for EEC membership was rooted in British history and national identity. This reflected his deep understanding of how the public would view the EEC as a challenge to British identity, though he himself viewed the issue in economic terms. Wilson sought to steer Britain toward a new identity as the industrial and technological heart of an integrated Europe. The British public, however, was not yet ready to follow him down that path.

From there it examines the 1967 EEC debate in public discourse. It uses the words of common Britons to construct a snapshot of Britain's "Finest Hour" ideology at the height of its influence and argues that Britain's World War II identity suffered a Pyrrhic victory in 1967. It held strong in the face of an event that undermined its primary tenets – the application the EEC – but would never again possess the iron grip that it once held over British society.

It next jumps forward to 1975 and focuses on the process that led to the 1975 national referendum on remaining in the EEC. Here it argues that Wilson consented to the referendum in order to control his rebellious party, but that once the referendum was underway he embraced it as an assertion of the will of the people over Parliamentary Sovereignty. Thus, the referendum was framed as the moment in which Britons were finally forced to conclusively decide on a new direction and a new identity.

Finally, it returns to the public discourse, but finds that in 1975 Britons had largely shaken off the constraints of the "Finest Hour" narrative and were prepared to step into an unknown future. The same anti-EEC arguments from 1967 were once again rallied, but this time there were counter-arguments that revealed Britons writing a new

narrative of their history. By marshaling their history, Britons forged an alternate national identity.

This thesis does not argue that British identity forever purged itself of the scars of World War II in 1975 or that it permanently shifted toward Europe. Recent events in the European Union – and current British public opinion about that troubled institution – clearly show otherwise. Rather, in contrasting the 1967 EEC debate with the 1975 referendum, I aim to demonstrate that though casting off the relentless weight of history is an excruciating process for a nation to undertake, and though it may not last for long, it is possible. National identities are not set in stone. They change, and they can *be* changed. Between 1967 and 1975, Britons showed the world how that can be done.

Chapter One

The Two Wilsons: Harold Wilson and the 1967 EEC Application

We are not entitled to sell our friends and kinsmen down the river for a problematical and marginal advantage in selling washing machines in Dusseldorf.

-Harold Wilson, August 3, 1961¹

...if the nineteenth century, the age of nationalism, the age of European liberalism, was illuminated by the heroism and statesmanship which created those great nation States, the twentieth century equally can go down in history as the age in which men had the vision, out of those nation States, out of the destruction of two world wars which themselves arose from conflicts of European nationalism, to create a new unity.

-Harold Wilson, May 8, 1967²

Between 1961 and 1967, Harold Wilson transformed from a strong opponent of the European Community into a Prime Minister who used the full weight of his title and political prowess to persuade Parliament to apply for British entry into that same Community. The two quotes above, separated by six years but both occurring in Parliamentary debates on the EEC, hold the key to understanding that transformation. In 1961, Wilson was droll and snappy. In dismissing the EEC with a short punch line, his message was clear: “Britain does not need Europe.” In 1967, however, the message and the tone were much different. The EEC, previously equated with washing machines, was now the catalyst for transformative political change in Europe. The tone shifted from down-to-earth, insular, and pithy to soaring, broad, and rather long-winded.³ Taken together, those two quotes evince more than a simple change of heart on a policy issue; they indicate a calculated decision to change not just his conclusion, but the fundamental way that he talked about the EEC question. This chapter explores that conversion and argues that it foreshadowed the shift in British identity that eventually

¹ Hansard, vol. 645, 3 August 1961, col. 1665.

² Hansard, vol. 746, 8 May 1967, col. 1097

³ Though “long-winded” seems critical, Wilson would most likely agree. He began that same speech by apologizing for its length and lamenting that it approaches “Gladstonian dimensions.”

asserted itself in the 1975 referendum. Wilson's shift, however, occurred well before Britain's. It began shortly after he ascended to Premiership in 1964.

Harold Wilson

Harold Wilson was born in 1916 to a politically active lower middle-class family. His great-grandfather was a village cobbler, his grandfather was a Workhouse Master in York, and his father was an industrial chemist who witnessed the birth of the Labour Party in Manchester and voted for Labour in the party's first major election in 1906; his mother was a schoolteacher.⁴ As such, Wilson's family was middle-class but had deep roots in the working class. This shaped his view of how British society should operate. In his memoirs, he wrote that his first experience in London – working as a research statistician in the Anglo-French Coordinating Committee in 1940 – made him uncomfortable. “I had brought with me a healthy set of provincial prejudices that all the real work was done in places like Yorkshire... and that London was the Wen where the spivs were making all the profits at the workers' expense,” Wilson wrote.⁵ He once claimed to have begun thinking like a Socialist at seven years of age and never stopped.⁶ Wilson may have cultivated his image as a London outsider and a voice of the working class, but that image reflected his genuine view of Britain. It was no mere political tactic.⁷

⁴ Gerard Eyre Noel, *Harold Wilson and the 'New Britain,'* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1964), p. 16-17

⁵ Harold Wilson, *Memoirs: The Making of a Prime Minister 1916-64,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. and Michael Joseph Ltd., 1986), p. 56

⁶ Dudley Smith, *Harold Wilson: A Critical Biography,* (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1964), p. 15

⁷ In modern Britain, Wilson is still a potent symbol for the rise of the working class in British politics. As one cabbie told me, politics before Wilson was “steeped in aristocracy and schoolboy stuff, but he changed things.”

Despite his lower middle-class roots, Wilson fought his way to a prestigious education on the merits of his intellectual prowess. He attended Wirral Grammar School for Boys, a state-run grammar school, and served as Head Boy. He excelled there, particularly at history.⁸ He received a county grant and an exhibition to study at Jesus College at Oxford, where he originally enrolled to study Modern History. Mid-way through his education, however, he changed fields to Philosophy, Politics, and Economics.⁹ Wilson was known as a hard worker and a first-rate student, with one of his professors calling him “the most brilliant pupil he had ever encountered.”¹⁰ Though he was an Oxford student, the fact that he came to the school from a lower middle-class family without money or connections helped him to avoid being lumped in with the posh “Oxbridge” circle in the eyes of Britons.

Wilson’s experience in World War II established him as an experienced bureaucrat and a skilled statistician – two descriptors that came to define his political persona. When the Second World War broke out, Wilson enlisted in the Armed Forces but was instead deemed a “specialist” and drafted into the Civil Service. During the war he jumped between the Ministry of Supply, the economics section of the War Cabinet Secretariat, the Ministry of Labour, and the Ministry of Fuel and Power.¹¹ At all of them, Wilson served as an economic advisor and statistician. He played a key role in what Lord William Beveridge, the influential British economist (and Wilson’s mentor at Oxford) who formulated the post-war British welfare state, called “the Other War”: the mass mobilization of the home front in order to produce a dedicated wartime

⁸ Dudley Smith, p. 20

⁹ *ibid*, p. 21

¹⁰ Gerard Eyre Noel, p. 38

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 26

economy.¹² In these years, Wilson gained a reputation as a gifted economist with a mind for statistics and a clever tactician. Having never served in the Armed Forces, however, Wilson did not gain the clout of the war hero that characterized many of his peers. Perhaps for this reason, he rarely evoked World War II as a political device while his rivals – largely veterans – mentioned it constantly. He was seen as what modern political observers would call a technocrat - a brilliant, scientifically-minded specialist who was devoid of the burly charisma of someone like Winston Churchill. He rose to prominence on the merits of his talent for micromanagement and his love of numbers, not his bravado.

Shortly after the war, Wilson decided to leave the bureaucratic world behind and run for Parliament. He was elected as Member of Parliament for Ormskirk in 1945 and quickly rose up the ranks of the Labour Party. He became President of the Board of Trade at the age of 31, marking him as the youngest British Cabinet member in the 20th Century. In 1963, Labour's candidate for Prime Minister – Hugh Gaitskell – was unexpectedly killed by the vicious autoimmune disease Lupus, and Wilson became Labour's new nominee after a chaotic four-way contest. Wilson was thrust into the spotlight, where he remained until his retirement from politics. His reputation as a technocrat, however, was cemented during World War II and never swayed. That reputation was well-earned; his love for statistics and his cold pragmatism were always present in his political style, never more so than in his approach to the European Economic Community.

¹² Gerard Eyre Noel, p. 42

Wilson's Economic Calculus (1961-66)

Until becoming Prime Minister, Harold Wilson viewed the EEC through an economic lens. It would be a misleading simplification of Wilson's position before 1964 to argue that he was wholly opposed to Britain joining the EEC on principle; rather, he *supported* the EEC in principle, but remained opposed to joining due to the specifics of the EEC's economic program. At a Parliamentary debate in 1961, Wilson identified his primary objection to EEC membership as the damage that it would do to trade with the Commonwealth and with other countries outside the EEC. He expressed specific concern over the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement, meat and butter import agreements with New Zealand, and other "tropical agricultural products."¹³ Britain's EEC negotiators had thus far been unable to secure guarantees that the UK would be allowed to maintain these trade agreements after joining the EEC. To Wilson, abandoning Commonwealth trade would be a double crime. It would cripple the small Commonwealth nations that relied on Britain to absorb much of their exports – particularly New Zealand, which in 1965-66 sent 45% of its total exports to the UK.¹⁴ It would also damage Britain, which in 1960 was still selling about 30% of its exports to the Commonwealth and only 15.9% to Europe.¹⁵ Wilson felt that the numbers spoke for themselves. Why abandon the larger trading bloc in favor of the smaller?

Even when opposed to joining the EEC, Wilson was entirely unmoved by the argument that the EEC would infringe on British sovereignty. In fact, he welcomed such

¹³ Hansard, vol. 645, 3 August 1961, col. 1663-4

¹⁴ Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, "Britain and the European Economic Community: Commonwealth Interests," 25 April 1967, National Archives Cabinet Papers

¹⁵ William I. Hitchcock, *The Struggle for Europe*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 233; Report by Officials, "Possible International Economic Arrangements," National Archives Cabinet Papers

an eventuality. “The whole history of political progress is a history of gradual abandonment of national sovereignty,” he told Parliament later in the same 1961 debate. “We abrogate it when we have a French referee at Twickenham.”¹⁶ Wilson deployed the same tactic here as in his “washing machines” comment: using a vivid folksy image to belittle his opponent’s position. Here, however, he was aiming to nullify an argument made by his own side. He was opposed to the EEC, but for specific economic reasons. He had no patience for broader political arguments.

Wilson’s laser-like focus on the economic aspects of the EEC speaks to the depth of his pragmatism. Wilson was no ideologue. He believed that history was moving in the direction of European – and eventually world – integration, but grand historical progress was less important to him than making sure that Britain could still import butter from New Zealand at low rates. When taking this pragmatism into account, one is inclined to agree with English historian Helen Parr’s conclusion that Wilson’s position on the EEC never really changed.¹⁷ It was from the start attuned to an economically-minded cost-benefit analysis. When circumstances changed, Wilson’s analysis changed with it.

By the time that Wilson became Prime Minister, circumstances had indeed changed. The EEC states were in the midst of a boom while Commonwealth trade was becoming less and less lucrative. France and Germany in particular were experiencing economic growth at a rate that significantly outpaced Britain’s. Between 1950 and 1960, France increased both its imports and exports threefold while Germany increased its

¹⁶ Hansard, vol. 645, 3 August 1961, col. 1667

¹⁷ Helen Parr, *Britain’s Policy Towards the European Community*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 15.

imports fourfold and its exports sixfold.¹⁸ Other indicators made clear that Europe showed no signs of slowing down. For example, between 1960 and 1966, the number of automobiles in France doubled from 5.5 million to 11 million.¹⁹ Most important from Britain's perspective, however, was how much of Europe's success seemed to be due to the EEC. Throughout the 1960s, just over a third of the EEC's imports and exports were flowing between EEC member states.²⁰ Such self-reliance had considerable appeal to Britain, an island country that was and is dependent on trade to survive. The EEC was establishing a successful track record.

Meanwhile, British trade with the Commonwealth was waning – a fact that juxtaposed with success of the surging EEC. By 1965, trade with the four most robust Commonwealth nations – Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada – had fallen to 18.7% of British exports.²¹ That same year, the six EEC states eclipsed the Commonwealth as the largest market for British goods.²² Commonwealth trade was not only losing ground in sheer volume; it was becoming far less lucrative. Between 1955 and 1965, trade with the Commonwealth grew at a dramatically slower rate than British trade with the rest of the world. In that decade, the value of exports to the Commonwealth grew by 11.5% and imports grew by 10.5%. In the same period, the value of British exports to the rest of the world grew by 93%, imports by 69%.²³ Furthermore, the Commonwealth nations were becoming progressively less reliant on the UK for trade. Canada, for example, saw its trade with Japan quadruple and its trade

¹⁸ William I. Hitchcock, p. 132.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 133.

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 132.

²¹ *ibid*, p. 233

²² *ibid*

²³ Note by the First Secretary of State and Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, "Britain and the European Economic Community; The Economic Background," National Archives Cabinet Papers, 28 April 1967, Ch. 8.1-8.2,

with Germany triple in the 1955-65 decade. Its trade with the UK increased by only 50%.²⁴ By establishing closer commercial ties with other nations, the Commonwealth states were losing their incentive to give Britain such privileged trading status. The system looked unsustainable.

In 1960, the UK helped establish the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) as an alternative to the EEC. It was envisioned as a simple free trade area that would allow European states wary of the EEC's implicit goal of eventual political unity to experience some of the same economic benefits of closer trading ties. By 1967, the EFTA consisted of seven full members: the UK, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, Portugal, and Austria. The organization, however, was not as lucrative as the British government had hoped. The EEC was fueled by the industrial might of Germany married with the agriculture of France. Without any comparable powerhouses in its ranks, the EFTA never approached self-sufficiency.

Harold Wilson, stepping into this changing environment as Prime Minister, saw that Britain's economy no longer stood on firm feet. If Britain stubbornly maintained its current course, it would continue to slip into international irrelevance. It needed a new trade foundation fit for the modern world. Wilson's cost/benefit analysis, unchanged in its parameters since before he took office, now swung in the direction of the need for a new economic arrangement and the EEC was the most obvious contender. In deciding to explore the possibility of the EEC, however, Wilson was faced with a Cabinet, a Party, and a nation driven by much more than economic calculus. What Wilson viewed as

²⁴ *ibid*, Ch. 8.3

economic, most Britons viewed as political. If he wished to persuade his nation to join with Europe, he would have to adjust accordingly.

The Two Wilsons (1966-67)

Between 1965 and 1967, Harold Wilson committed himself and his government to make a second application to the European Economic Community, and in doing so discussed the EEC in terms of British identity for the first time. There were, in effect, two Harold Wilsons. The private Harold Wilson was concerned solely with the economic calculus of EEC membership. This Wilson ordered the creation of a series of long, complex studies of the EEC. One such study, marked SECRET GUARD and distributed to his Cabinet Ministers, was an elaborate 30-page analysis of possible alternatives to joining the EEC. It identified two such possibilities: continued abstention from any global communities aside from the Commonwealth and the creation of an Atlantic Free Trade Area (AFTA).

On the subject of abstention, the committee's hopes were dim. In the cover letter of the report, Cabinet Secretary Burke Trend summarized the committee's jargon-filled findings in plainer language, contending that it would be impossible to maintain Britain's current standard of living without entering the EEC. "In form we might be more free," he wrote, "but it would be a freedom to submit to disagreeable necessities."²⁵ Joining the EEC, the report concluded, was Britain's only avenue of maintaining international economic relevance.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 3

AFTA was favored by British Ministers across the political spectrum for years, but was dismissed as a pipe dream by the interdepartmental committee tasked with assessing its viability. A free trade agreement between the US and the UK, AFTA would have effectively moved the British Isles across the Atlantic and away from Europe. The Cabinet report, however, concluded that it “could only come into being as a result of major changes in US policy, and perhaps only following US initiatives.”²⁶ Trend’s cover letter was even more damning. “There is no possibility of an AFTA coming into being with the world economic order as it is now,” he wrote. “Decisions about future economic strategy for the United Kingdom must be taken in the context of what is possible now: and at present AFTA is not an ‘option’ open to the United Kingdom.”²⁷ Trend and the committee that wrote the report were aware of how important the EEC was to the United States’ vision of a unified Europe as a bolster against communist spread. The EEC was seen in the US as one of the most important engines behind European recovery and continued strength, and a strong Europe meant that the US could continue to roll back its economic support of the region. The US had no reason to support a rival program to the EEC, and every interest in making that bloc even stronger by promoting British entry.

Dense analytical reports such as this were the private Harold Wilson’s bread and butter. Wilson later wrote in his memoir that after reading exactly such a report, “the case for applying to join EEC had been strengthened in [his] mind.”²⁸ Wilson’s memoir

²⁶ *Report by Officials, “Possible International Economic Arrangements,”* National Archives Cabinet Papers, p. 7

²⁷ Note by the Secretary of the Cabinet, “Europe: Alternatives to Membership of the European Economic Community,” National Archives Cabinet Papers, p. 2

²⁸ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 293.

focuses on portraying him as unchanging in his commitment to EEC since taking office in 1964. Tellingly, this brief line is the closest he comes to admitting to changing his mind on the subject in the entire book. To the private Wilson, everything came down to numbers. This was the Wilson who gained a reputation as a brilliant statistician in World War II and who carried that reputation ever since.

In stark contrast, the second Wilson- the public Wilson – was focused almost exclusively on the politics of the EEC. In speeches, he was keen on, as he put it, taking “excursion[s] into history.”²⁹ In these soliloquys, he began with the birth of the European nation-state and posited a forward progression of history: “not the negative concept of a retreat from imperialism, but the forward move from Empire to Commonwealth.”³⁰ By Commonwealth, he meant a broad conception of international unity and cooperation. As such, he framed EEC membership as an extension of the international fraternity that Britons felt with the Commonwealth they already had. European integration was the next inevitable phase of history. Britain could embrace it or be left behind – and if it decided to embrace the EEC, it had to do so soon. The EEC was a moving target that had been evolving since its inception. The longer Britain waited to join, the longer its policies continued to evolve without British influence.

Wilson placed particular emphasis on arguing that Britain’s technological prowess, if married with Europe’s vast markets, could allow the UK to return to its lost place as the world’s technological capitol. In 1966, at the Prime Minister’s annual speech at Guildhall – the City of London’s town hall – Wilson advocated for:

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 334.

³⁰ *ibid*

...a drive to create a new technological community to pool within Europe the enormous technological inventiveness of Britain and other European countries, to enable Europe, on a competitive basis, to become more self-reliant... I can think of nothing that would make a greater reality of the whole European concept. And in this field of technological cooperation no one has more to contribute than Britain...³¹

In making such arguments, Wilson attempted to reframe the issue from Britain needing Europe in order to remain relevant to Europe needing Britain in order to best realize its long-term objectives. This tactic served twin purposes. First, it was a marketing ploy aimed at Europe. By asserting Britain's usefulness to the EEC, Wilson attempted to create a better position for negotiating the UK's terms of entry.³² Second, and more important to this thesis, it also served as an appeal to British national identity. Britons took immense pride in their nation's history as the cradle of the industrial revolution. At its peak, technological wizardry defined the Empire to Britons and to the world. This sense of awe was perfectly captured by Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, a novel dedicated in large part to breathlessly describing the expanse of the British Empire and the technology that enabled its success. Verne, as a Frenchman, showed this from an outsider's perspective though his protagonist Phileas Fogg was British. Britain's technological mastery, however, was not to last. The United States, spurred on by its massive industrial expansion during World War II, replaced Great Britain as the world's technological mecca in the post-war era. That usurpation robbed Britain of a key feature of its national identity. Wilson, by suggesting that EEC membership could position Britain to become the technological center of Europe, offered Britons a chance

³¹ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record*, p. 300

³² The largest point of contention between the UK and the EEC with regard to Britain's terms of entry was the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The CAP originated as a deal between France and Germany in which Germany gained access to the French market in exchange for supporting France's farmers. The CAP established fixed minimum prices for agricultural, subsidized farmers, and – most importantly to Britain – imposed tariffs on the import of agricultural products from outside the EEC. The British government feared that the CAP would hinder its ability to trade with the Commonwealth and sought guaranteed tariff exceptions for the Commonwealth states.

to reclaim a prized title that had been lost. Wilson's argument, however, looked forward, not backward.

By pairing his technological argument with his "excursions into history," Wilson formulated a new British national identity rooted in carving out a unique and important role for Britain *as a component of Europe*, not as an independent state. Britain could once again become a technological powerhouse, but only by joining with Europe in "a new unity."³³ According to Wilson's narrative, Britain no longer had a place in the world alone, but as a part of Europe it could once again taste international glory. Moreover, if Britain resisted this new identity, it would be fighting the "forward move" of history.³⁴ Britain, he argued, must swim with the tide.

This new public Wilson is difficult to reconcile with the technocrat who managed Britain's "Other War" during World War II. Historians may never be certain of the exact reason for the sharp divide between the private Wilson and the public Wilson. His memoirs are much too guarded. The public Wilson's argument was a political tactic, as are any arguments made by a politician. The question of how he became convinced that his approach was the best possible tactic merits further investigation.³⁵ Nevertheless, his argument was prescient regardless of how it was formulated.

Britons by and large did not take to Wilson's narrative in 1967, but by the 1975 referendum it was the dominant mode of thinking. Wilson's argument foreshadowed the shift in British national identity that asserted itself in the 1975 referendum. In order

³³ Hansard, vol. 746, 8 May 1967, col. 1097

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ Wilson's personal papers, held exclusively at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, might offer a clue. Unfortunately, I was unable to attain access to them for this thesis.

to understand the full magnitude of that shift, however, one must first examine the starting-point: British national identity as it existed in 1967.

Chapter Two

Keep Calm and Carry On: The 1967 EEC Debate in Public Discourse

This is something which we know, in our bones, we cannot do... For Britain's story and her interests lie far beyond the continent of Europe.

-Anthony Eden, 1952

Harold Wilson's narrative of British history failed to translate into public approval for EEC membership in 1967. While Britain's major national newspapers were full of economic jargon and interchangeable letters of support for EEC from Members of Parliament, the country's regional newspapers were flooded with a storm of letters raging against membership. There were letters of support as well, but in the six regional papers examined in this study the negative letters dramatically outnumbered the positive. That is not to claim that all of British public opinion was opposed to EEC by that same majority; angry people are more motivated to act than their happy counterparts, resulting in an unavoidable bias toward angrier respondents in formats such as Letters to the Editor. In addition, one can never rule out editorial bias in the selection of which letters were published. Nevertheless, the sheer scale of the letters sent, the rhetorical ferocity of so many of those letters, and the remarkable consistency in themes between them regardless of geographic distribution indicates that passionate, motivated opposition to EEC membership was widespread.

The letters, pro and con, all centered around three key themes in the EEC debate: British pride, separation from continental Europe, and British cultural heritage. While these themes are all uniquely recognizable, and for ease of analysis will be examined separately, it will become apparent that they were not discrete but rather interacted and

intersected in important ways. Taken together, they create a thorough depiction of British self-perception and identity as it stood in 1967. That the notion of joining the EEC challenged all three of these pillars of identity goes a long way toward explaining why it was such a fundamental affront to the way that so many Britons viewed their nation and themselves.

British history was infused in all three of these themes, and the memory of Britain's experience during World War II was particularly pervasive. In 1967, the British myth of World War II as the nation's finest hour – the moment that Britain saved the world from the forces of tyranny by standing up alone and refusing to give in where the larger nations of Europe had all crumbled – was as powerful as ever. Britain was the savior of Europe, the argument went. The thought of now asking help from those weak nations that had rolled over to Hitler was a disgrace, let alone the thought of going to Hitler's nation itself. As a former member of the 8th Army disdainfully put the issue, "Whatever happened to this country that we go sniveling to the people who, 25 years ago, were beholden to us for saving their country?"¹ This question was implicit in many of the letters from 1967. Thus, history – and particularly the narrative of British history established by Winston Churchill – determined the framework through which Britons understood the EEC. In 1967, that framework showed no signs of loosening. History was a barrier that could not yet be overcome. Instead, Britons decided to keep calm and carry on just as they did in World War II, whatever the outcome.

¹ G. Selby, ex-8th Army, Kennerly Road, Davenport, Stockport, "Why go cap in hand to Europe," *Manchester Evening News*, May 8, 1967, Postbag

British Pride

The first and most fundamental theme exposed by Wilson's EEC application was what one correspondent to *The Birmingham Post* referred to as "the symbol British," but what could be more simply termed British national pride. The letter in question was written by C. J. Gorchmann of Hall Green and was published by the *Post* on May 9, 1967 under the header "Britain and the 'Six' – a question of loyalties." Gorchmann used sweeping language, referring to the EEC issue as "the sword of Damocles," forever hanging over the heads of the British people. He used the metaphor of the dog that had a bone, but saw a larger one reflected in the water in front of him. The dog dropped his bone in the water to get the reflection, but ended up with no bone at all. Gorchmann implied that such would be the case if Britain abandoned the Commonwealth in favor of Europe. But despite Gorchmann's vivid figurative language, his letter was most revealing when at its bluntest: "We are tired of the humiliation that the once mighty British should go, cap in hand, to European heads with the appeal, 'Please can we come in?'... Let the symbol British once again mean something in the world."² To Gorchmann, British national pride was at an all-time low, and joining with Europe would only damage it further by taking away Britain's last semblance of independence.

Gorchmann's letter is one of the clearest illustrations of a connection that constantly recurred in the public opinion of 1967: the link between Britain's level of international respect and the self-respect of the British people. It is essential to realize just how personal this link was. For many Britons in 1967, the reputation of their nation was not simply tied to some vague notion of collective patriotism; Britain was their daily

² C. J. Gorchmann, Hall Green, Birmingham 28. "Britain and the 'Six' – a question of loyalties," *The Birmingham Post*, May 9, 1967, Letter to the Editor

source of motivation and self-esteem. “What man ever did his best when his personal pride had been taken from him?” asked A. M. Gidman of Manchester. “The same is true of a nation. We are being stripped of everything we had pride in. How shall we put forth all the efforts we are told we should, and why?”³ To Mrs. Gidman and many like her, the symbol British – the idea that Britain was not just another country among many but the lion that steered the world – was a vital part of the fabric of their lives. Gidman’s words evoked depression. She questioned not just how she could overcome the challenges of the future, but *what the effort would even be for* if Britons no longer held pride in their nation. She derived self-worth from her nation’s reputation.

For many, the modern sources of British national pride were Britain’s role in World War II and the Commonwealth. Churchill’s “Finest Hour” narrative created a distinct superiority complex in the British national psyche – by “saving” Europe, Britain had established itself as in a different league than the Continent. This post-war superiority complex in turn magnified the importance of the Commonwealth to Britons everywhere. “S,” an ex-Eighth Army and Intelligence Service member, illustrated this dynamic in the clearest terms possible in the pages of the Manchester Evening News. “In 1940, this country had a moment of truth,” S writes. “Among the few friends we had were the Canadians, the Australians, and New Zealanders. They were with us to the death... We should stick to our friends, our real friends, the tried and true... And those real friends are not in Europe. They never have been and they never will be.”⁴ To Britain, the Commonwealth allies stayed in the fight to the bitter end, where the

³ (Mrs) A M Gidman, Manchester 20, “No pride left,” *Manchester Evening News*, May 12, 1967, Postbag

⁴ S (ex-Eighth Army and Intelligence Service), Lancs, “Our real friends,” *Manchester Evening News*, May 9, 1967, Postbag

European nations that the Government now sought to join either rolled over or were the source of the cataclysm.

Of course, the reason that the Commonwealth nations did not succumb to Nazi Germany was the very fact that they were not a part of Europe. It had little to do with their natural fortitude or unwavering loyalty; Hitler had enough on his plate on his own continent. Nevertheless, to the British the Commonwealth had succeeded where Europe had failed, and as such earned Britain's loyalty now that the war was over. The thought of abandoning the Commonwealth in favor of Europe was viewed by many as nothing less than spitting in the face of Britain's heritage. As S concluded, "anything that weaken[s] the ties between Britain and her kith and kin... is bad, dangerously bad, morally bad, infamously bad."

In the view of Britons, the Commonwealth nations took on a somewhat contradictory character. They were the brave few that stood with Britain, but they were also spoken of as children in need of guidance. "Before our eyes stretches the consortium of nations which we created and which, for seven years has been sadly neglected – crying out for leadership in this bewildering world!" wrote P.H.⁵ This paternalistic tone is pervasive in the way that Britons spoke of the Commonwealth in the 1967 EEC debate. In a different letter, the same P.H. brought the subtext front and center: "May 11, 1967: one of the great dates in history. The day when Britain gave up her role as 'Mother' of a group of nations embracing a quarter of the world..."⁶ Britain's relationship to the Commonwealth was a powerful cocktail, then – Britain simultaneously viewed itself as both mother and comrade-in-arms, to say nothing of the

⁵ P. H., "Commonwealth before Europe," *The Birmingham Post*, May 8, 1967, Letters to the Editor

⁶ P. H., "Common Market," *The Birmingham Post*, May 11, 1967, Letters to the Editor

Commonwealth's immense symbolic value as the last living vestige of the once-mighty British Empire.

The Commonwealth was used as the basis for the primary counterproposal to EEC entry: an expanded free trade zone consisting of the Commonwealth, the EFTA nations, and in some proposals the United States. As discussed in Chapter 1, Wilson and his cabinet examined this proposal in great detail, but no matter the angle concluded that it was economically unsound. To the public, however, the debate was driven more by emotion than analysis.

Take, for example, a letter from Mrs. L. H. Midwinter. After supporting the free trade zone consisting of the Commonwealth and EFTA states, she wrote: "Surely we are more akin to them than to the French – who let us down in the war, and to the Germans whose wartime crimes against humanity will never be forgotten."⁷ Or, for an angrier opinion, there was F.J.M. of Timperley. To F.J.M., British politicians "frittered away the Empire... Had our heritage been managed properly we could have had our own world-wide common market." Right on cue, F.J.M. concluded by once again bringing it back to World War II with gusto: "Dr. Goebbels' main ambition during the last war was to see Britain 'a forgotten little island lost in the mists of the North Sea.' Our politicians are doing the job for him."⁸

Britons' emotional ties to the Commonwealth, dramatically enhanced by the experience of World War II, were so overwhelming that in one remarkable letter they even served as an argument against analytical evaluation. Defending the

⁷ L. H. Midwinter (Mrs), Cemlyn Park, Penmaenmawr, "Why so eager?" *Liverpool Daily Post*, May 22, 1967, Letters to the Editor

⁸ F.J.M., Timberley, "Sold out," *Manchester Evening News*, May 9, 1967, Postbag

Commonwealth-EFTA free trade zone against (accurate) claims that it was statistically unfeasible, this correspondent wrote: “Thank goodness that staticians [sic] were overruled in 1939. Facts and figures (and computers) would have proved that it was impossible for us to win the war, and by now, those of us who were not exterminated would all be good little Nazis.”⁹ This reference to statisticians can be read as a slight against Harold Wilson, who served as a statistician during the war. The writer concludes by urging politicians to trust in “the spirit of the British people” to overcome any challenge. The spirit of the British people, however, was in many ways built on the values of logic and reason. Britain’s rise to glory stemmed from its status as the heart of the industrial revolution. Its cultural icons were men such as Charles Darwin and Isaac Newton, its foremost literary hero Sherlock Holmes – all symbols of the power of science and logic. But such was the power of the Commonwealth when infused with the battle scars of World War II – it was enough to convince many Britons that blood was thicker than reason.

The extent to which British national pride colored the ins and outs of everyday life for many is seen in a letter from S. D. of South Reddish. S. D. claimed to have never purchased any textile goods of foreign manufacture in his/her life in an effort to remain true to the Queen. The writer worries, however, that after joining the ECC such a British-only policy will no longer be possible, what with the Continent “poised ready to flood this country with their own goods, but not for our benefit!”¹⁰ While S. D.’s particular expression of pride may have been eccentric, it speaks to the concrete power

⁹ P. H., “Commonwealth before Europe,” *The Birmingham Post*, May 8, 1967, Letters to the Editor

¹⁰ S. D., South Reddish, “Buying British,” *Manchester Evening News*, May 3, 1967, Postbag

of British national pride in the ways that Britons lived their lives. And just as poor S. D. feared, that pride was fading.

Britain's fall from eminence was a process that began well before Harold Wilson decided to apply to the EEC. Nevertheless, to many Britons the possibility of joining the EEC was the *source* of Britain's fall, not a response to it. A reader of the *Birmingham Post* wrote that because of the decision to join Europe, "the damage is done... in the eyes of the world Britain is now finished as a great nation."¹¹ A correspondent identified only as "Patriot" concurred in one of the grimmest letters of the debate:

Where is our national pride? ...It is high time that the peoples of these isles aroused themselves from their torpor and realised that what Philip of Spain, Napoleon of France, the Kaiser and Hitler of Germany could not accomplish by force is about to be realised by European political dominance over Britain... Wake up, Britain, to the tremendous implications involved, raise your voices in protest.¹²

T. S. Pursell drove the point home even further in the pages of *Express & Star* on May 3. If Britain joins the ECC, Pursell wrote, "...the lion's roar would become a miserable squeak. It would be a signal to sound the 'last post' and haul down the Union Jack. The outside world would regard Britain as a third rate power and a spent force."¹³ Taken together, these letters illuminate a widespread, consistent logic. Britons derived a sense of pride and purpose from their nation's global status, which was under attack by the looming threat of joining with Europe; therefore, the EEC directly threatened to rob Britons of their pride and their purpose. It was taken as a personal affront, and Britons reacted accordingly.

¹¹ P.H., Birmingham 17, "Common Market," *The Birmingham Post*, May 12, 1967, Letters to the Editor

¹² Patriot, Romiley. "National pride?" *Manchester Evening News*, May 5, 1967, Postbag

¹³ T. S. Pursell, 46, Oxbarn-avenue, Wolverhampton, "Putting Case Against the Common Market," *Express & Star*, May 3, 1967, Letters

Opinions in favor of joining with Europe were fuelled by the same basic impulse. The key difference in rhetoric, however, was the pro-Europe camp's view of the EEC as a bandage to an already-bleeding wound rather than a fresh injury. "On balance, and with nostalgia, I am in favour of entry, as I should like to think that Great Britain will still be a force to be reckoned with when my granddaughter reaches maturity," opined Sutton Coldfield's E. T. Lea.¹⁴ Lea's recognition of the "nostalgia" in her argument is a powerful insight into the debate at large, not simply her contribution. Almost everyone in the debate yearned for Britain to return to its days of glory, and almost everyone was personally scarred by the decline of British national pride. The difference lay in approach: should Britain return to the glory days by mimicking the behavior of the past, or should it attempt to create a new glory day by forging a different future? For many, the answer to that question was determined by the answer to another: were Britons European?

Are We European?

The second thread that must be traced to understand the 1967 EEC debate is the question of whether Britons considered themselves part of Europe or a separate entity. The most revealing window into this question was an exchange of letters sent to *The Liverpool Daily Post* in response to the Liverpool City Council's decision to fly the European Flag on May 5 as a symbol of approval for Wilson's EEC decision. An article published in the *Daily Post* described the outrage that many Liverpudlians expressed over this decision. The first writer to respond to the article was John Rimmer, in favor of the City Council's decision. "The hysterical opposition... would lead one to think that

¹⁴ E. T. Lea, Boldmere Road, Sutton Coldfield, Untitled, *The Birmingham Post*, May 8 1967, Letters to the Editor

the Council had advocated federation with Luxembourg... We are a European nation by history and geography... We should be proud of our place in Europe; not ashamed of it in a display of insular chauvinism.”¹⁵

As Mr. Rimmer may have expected, the “hysterical opposition” that he denounced was not content to sit quietly. “How can we be European,” J. R. Gradwell asked, “when our language differs from any spoken on the Continent... and our legal and Parliamentary systems are also very different?” On the subject of World War II, Gradwell added that “we were *only* in a position to oppose Hitler because we were self-governing, and not a part of an amorphous ‘Europe.’”¹⁶ Gradwell identified himself in the letter as the Secretary of the Merseyside Committee Anti-Common Market League. A. Morris, replying three days later, took note of Gradwell’s affiliation. “Mr. Gradwell’s society should be re-named ‘fuddy duddies,’” Morris wrote.¹⁷ That may be so, but Gradwell’s Anti-Common Market League was no Liverpool anomaly. It was a national organization with branches across Britain, primarily composed of Tories, that had enough members and funding to organize door-to-door canvassing and pamphlets that were mailed to houses nationwide on election years throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Rimmer, the writer of the first letter, also responded to Gradwell’s rebuttal, though his new letter was contained to a dry explication of the English language’s European roots.¹⁸

This exchange shows that opinion on Britain’s identity as a European state – or lack thereof – was split and passionately defended on both sides of the divide. That it

¹⁵ John Rimmer, Norgate Street, Liverpool 4, “We should be proud of being European,” *The Liverpool Daily Post*, April 13, 1967, Letters to the Editor

¹⁶ J. R. Gradwell, “We’re not European,” *The Liverpool Daily Post*, April 18, 1967, Letters to the Editor

¹⁷ A. Morris, Harrington Road, Formby, “Britain and Europe,” *The Liverpool Daily Post*, April 21, 1967, Letters to the Editor

¹⁸ John Rimmer, Norgate Street, Liverpool 4. “Britain and Europe,” *The Liverpool Daily Post*, April 21, 1967, Letters to the Editor

was kicked off by public uproar over the City Council's flying of the European flag indicates either that the balance was tilted more toward the anti-Europe camp, or that that camp was much louder than their opposite numbers. But while this exchange was the only time that the question of Britain's place in Europe was directly confronted, the language used by Britons in the debate – even those who supported joining the EEC – points toward a consensus feeling that Britain and Europe were indeed naturally separate entities. Take, for instance, L. Hyman's letter to the *Manchester Evening News* of May 3. "Surely we... have a right to some say in the matter as to whether we are willing to give up our traditional independent way of life and to become partners with people with whom we have very little in common."¹⁹ This letter shares a common thread with Pursell's - joining with the EEC is perceived as the first step in the process of European domination over Britain. This very idea indicates that in the minds of these writers, Britain is indeed separate from Europe; otherwise the phrase "European domination over Britain" would be meaningless. There is another issue that links these letters together with many others as well. The EEC was not merely a threat to Britain's non-European identity, but also threatened to put an end to its noble heritage of sovereignty and democracy.

British Heritage

British letter-writers in 1967 felt that by joining the EEC, Britain would be abandoning its unique cultural heritage in exchange for amalgamation with a faceless European bloc. In formulating their argument, they focused on two facets of British

¹⁹ L. Hyman, *Manchester 14*, "What have we got in common with the Market?" *Manchester Evening News*, May 3, 1967, Postbag

heritage: Britain's history as a nation rooted in liberty and traditional British domestic values.

The EEC presented a two-front attack on Britons' conception of their constitutional heritage. It was believed that the EEC would strip Parliament and the Queen of their sovereignty and, in the memorable phrase of one self-proclaimed "ordinary housewife," transform England into "a nonentity."²⁰ But equally damaging to Britain's liberty in the eyes of many was Parliament's decision to force Britain into the EEC in the first place. There were numerous calls for a public referendum and accusations of Parliamentary dictatorship. L. M. Hopkins, a reader of the *Evening Post*, summed up the mood so well on May 2 that the subsequent week, the paper published three opinions in praise of his letter. "The moment the Treaty was signed," Hopkins wrote, "the constitutional status of H. M. the Queen would be grievously impaired. Seven hundred years of developing parliamentary government would be jeopardised..." Hopkins went on to accuse the Government of being manipulated by "powerful vested interests" and declared that "it would be nothing short of blatant dictatorship to apply for entry without first arranging a national referendum."²¹

Hopkins' cry was repeated in letters to newspapers across the country, often accompanied by the refrain that the Government had "no mandate" for its actions.²² "Why should a handful of men in Parliament take it upon themselves to force a nation of 51M people into a position... which the vast majority of the people do not want?" asked

²⁰ M. V. Passmore (Mrs), Cemlyn Park, Penmaenmawr, "What benefits," *Liverpool Daily Post*, May 1, 1967, Postbag

²¹ L. M. Hopkins, Wick Crest, Devizes, Wilts, "Britain and the Common Market," *The Evening Post*, May 2, 1967, Voice of the West

²² Among them: two letters to the *Evening Post* on May 5 by D. G. Hulin and G. W. Roberts, another letter to the same paper on May 8 by G. C. Watts, and a letter to the *Manchester Evening Post* by Edward Riley on May 12.

L. Hyman.²³ In a letter from T. Jones, one can sense a feeling of betrayal and exasperation: “I do not want it. Nor do millions of others. But what can we do? Who can we vote for?”²⁴ The rhetoric reached its venomous pinnacle in the hands of Mrs. Stella Gentry of Bristol. “Like naughty children, those of us who reject our proposed entry into the Common Market... are reprimanded for not knowing what is best for us. ‘Eat up your cabbage, it’s good for you!’ The same applies.”²⁵ There are many, more letters that cover the same ground, ranging from the down-to-earth language of Mrs. Gentry to simple expressions of frustration as blunt as these words by an unnamed writer from Salford: “Far too much power lies in the hands of too few... It’s time the whole system was changed.”²⁶ In all of these letters, the message is clear: Parliament was acting against the will of the people and was throwing away Britain’s national sovereignty; the people must be allowed to decide their own fate.

The prominence of calls for a national referendum and the derision of Parliament for acting without one was a telling phenomenon. In 1967, there had never been a national referendum in the United Kingdom. What these many letter-writers were asking for was unprecedented. That a referendum on the EEC would be viewed as a right of the British people – that Parliament would be accused of dictatorship in a country where Parliament, not the people, was sovereign – reflected Britons’ deeply held myth of their country as a progenitor and bastion of liberty. A referendum would itself be an infringement of Parliamentary sovereignty. Thus, by demanding a referendum,

²³ L. Hyman, Manchester 14, “What have we got in common with the Market?” *Manchester Evening News*, May 3, 1967, Postbag

²⁴ T. Jones, 11 Simister Lane, Prestwich, “Living costs,” *Manchester Evening News*, May 5, 1967, Postbag.

²⁵ Stella R. Gentry (Mrs.), 8, Springfield Avenue, Shirehampton, Bristol, Untitled, *The Evening Post*, May 12, 1967, Voice of the West

²⁶ Anonymous, Salford, Fairplay, “Too much power,” *Manchester Evening News*, May 9, 1967, Postbag

Britons indicated that independence from Europe was a more important component of their national identity than preserving Parliamentary sovereignty. Their heritage as an abstract home for liberty was more important than the institutions through which that liberty had traditionally been defended. In reaching these conclusions, Britons subscribed to a particular narrative of their history – one in which Britain’s primary defining feature was its separation from Europe. That narrative was rarely challenged in 1967; the weight of history was too great.

British heritage was also closely connected to the traditional domestic values represented by the “ordinary housewife.” Traditional gender roles were being challenged across the Western world in the second half of the 1960s, and for Britons that change was linked to the fall of British national pride. The Empire had been the defining fact of British life for generations – a source of stability. When that stability fell away, it seemed as though nothing was sacred and nothing was safe. The reaction – as it always is when the status quo is challenged – was to clamp down, hence the recurring focus on the simple British housewife that was so often used as a counterpoint to the complicated techno-jargon and fast-paced cosmopolitan drive of the pro-EEC forces. If Britons could hold on to their traditional domestic way of life, perhaps they could hold on to the spirit of the Empire as well.

We have already met one such “ordinary housewife,” but she was far from the only person to identify herself as such. In fact, the phrase “ordinary housewife” served as a powerful recurring symbol for British domestic traditions in the 1967 debate. It was used by men, but more often it was used by women who self-identified as ordinary

housewives to signal their detachment from the lofty, philosophical side of the debate and their interest in more material concerns.

A letter from M. V. Passmore of Penmaenmawr, the same housewife mentioned earlier, acted as an early template for similar letters to come. On May 1, she wrote to the *Liverpool Daily Post*: “Will someone please tell an ordinary housewife just what are the benefits we may expect if we join the Common Market? ...It is said that butter would cost 8s a pound, and the Sunday joint two or three times its present price. Exactly what are the benefits?”²⁷ D. G. Hulin made the same argument in Bristol: “If every housewife were made aware of the increased cost of food alone I am sure the majority would vote against entry.”²⁸ And Mrs. Beedell, also of Bristol, agreed: “Does the housewife realise what [Common Market entry] will mean? It is going to make some weekly pay packets look pretty sick.”²⁹ Mrs. Williams of Clevedon brought it home: “We shall just have to lower our standard of living which, with two children to bring up, is not what we expected to have to do.”³⁰

The main concern in all of these letters is the increase in the cost of living that was predicted upon entry into the EEC – a concern shared in dozens of other letters – but the specific focus on the housewife in these letters and others is notable. The housewife was not just a symbol of the simple, traditional way of British living; she evoked the glory days of the Empire. The world was rapidly changing in the 1960s – the

²⁷ M. V. Passmore (Mrs), Cemlyn Park, Penmaenmawr, “What benefits,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, May 1, 1967, Postbag

²⁸ D. G. Hulin, 23 Stockwood Lane, Stockwood, Bristol 4, “Common Market: no mandate,” *The Evening Post*, May 5, 1967, Voice of the West

²⁹ Mrs. Beedell, 84 Eden Grove, Horfield, Bristol 7, “Common Market,” *The Evening Post*, May 8, 1967, Voice of the West

³⁰ P. A. Williams (Mrs.), 5 Kennaway Road, Clevedon, “Reductoins?” [sic], *The Evening Post*, Voice of the West

EEC threatening to bring yet more change – but in these letters one could never tell that the domestic life of Britons which formed an essential part of their national identity had budged an inch in the last century.

Weaving the Threads Together: British National Identity in the 1967 Debate

This chapter has traced three threads of argument in the 1967 EEC debate: the dwindling of British national pride, the question of whether Britain was a European state or an entity of its own, and the uniqueness of Britain's cultural heritage. All three of these threads were built on the same foundation: a particular narrative of British history that posited that Britons were preordained to lead the world, and that if they were not fulfilling that role, they were not fulfilling their destiny. When one steps back, these threads are revealed to form a tightly-knit fabric that composes a comprehensive portrait of British identity in 1967.

The legacy of World War II not only reinforced ties to the Commonwealth in the minds of Britons – it gave them something new to be proud of just as they lost the Empire, their old source of national pride. The narrative of World War II as Britain's "finest hour" convinced Britons that their golden age was recent enough to be within reach. Rather than viewing the decline of the British Empire as the gradual process that it was, the heroic narrative of World War II made it seem as though Britain went from riches to rags in a mere twenty years. It kept Britons in denial for decades; the move toward the European Community was consequently felt as a violent upheaval and disillusionment rather than the culmination of a gradual shift. The rhetoric of the age reflects that feeling. The rug was being pulled out from under the British people.

Similarly, Britain's heritage of liberty was an essential component of its identity. Much like the Commonwealth was viewed as the last vestige of the British Empire, the notion of parliamentary republicanism and the sovereignty of the queen served as the final wall in the fortress of British greatness. The Empire may have been gone, but as long as Britain's unique form of government remained intact, Britain would forever be a special place on earth. At least Britons still had the Queen. The EEC threatened to fundamentally challenge the British form of government, and with it strip away the last layer of meaning of traditional British identity.

The British identity that had been in place for generations was challenged on every front by the 1967 bid for entry into the EEC. It was an identity rooted in the symbolic and material power of the British Empire. People across Britain derived personal value from the Empire; they were raised with the narrative that the Empire made them unique and gave their lives meaning. A long history of parliamentary governance and a commitment to individual liberty was a strong component of the Empire, as was an idealized vision of simple domestic living. World War II renewed the narrative of British uniqueness for a new generation, convincing Britons that their nation was different from the rest of Europe, putting up an invisible wall in the English Channel between those who fell to Hitler and those who stood fast. It also added potency to Britons' feeling of connection to the Commonwealth states, who stood fast with them. The possibility of joining the European Community posed a direct threat to every one of these central tenets of British identity. Britons were left with a choice: fight a futile battle to return to the past and effectively become Goebbels' threatened "little island lost in the mist," or forge a new identity and adapt to the future. They could

succumb to one narrative of their history, or they could rewrite that narrative and reinvent their nation. In 1975, they chose the latter.

Chapter Three

“The Choice is Yours”: The 1975 UK National Referendum

He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery.

-Harold Wilson, January 23, 1967

On July 3, 1975, Harold Wilson delivered a short speech at Camden Town Hall in North London on the subject of why the UK should remain in the European Community. A rambunctious atmosphere filled the packed hall. Members of the crowd began shouting over Wilson shortly after his speech began. “Every minute you are interrupting there is another one thousand votes for yes,” Wilson scolded, trusting that the British public desired a polite debate rather than a shouting match. The hecklers only grew louder. Wilson, becoming frustrated, asked if there were any communists in the audience and accused the hecklers of “total intolerance.” Finally, after twenty minutes of failing to be heard over the angry roar of the crowd, Wilson – still on stage – took a sip of water, lit up his pipe, and smoked it to completion in silence while the crowd kept screaming. Eventually the din died down, and Wilson resumed his speech.¹ In that moment, Harold Wilson came face to face with the furious public resistance to Britain’s membership in the EEC. He responded with a touch of ideological grandstanding, then by stepping back and relaxing while the hecklers shouted themselves hoarse – by knowing when his voice had outgrown its use and letting the voice of the public take over, whether they supported him or not. On a larger scale, this same strategy was at the heart of the 1975 UK referendum.

¹ “Wilson speech drowned out by hecklers,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, June 4, 1975

The 1975 referendum was a shrewd political move by Wilson in his ongoing struggles with both the Conservative opposition and the anti-Europe wing of his own party, but it was also the watershed moment in which Britons were finally forced to decide what sort of nation Britain would become. Since World War II, most Britons were content with their nation's independent, "Finest Hour"-tinged identity. The economy was in disarray, Britain's international influence was on the decline, but that was all the more reason to hunker down and trust the British stiff upper lip to see the UK through to its next finest hour. For decades, the British government had been moving toward closer ties with Europe in fits and starts. However, every step that it took was cut short, either by a firm "Non" from General De Gaulle or by the lingering power of the "Finest Hour" narrative. By 1975, De Gaulle had stepped away from power as the result of losing a public referendum and Britain was a member of the ECC, but a strong contingency of the British population – still clinging to Britain's old identity – was declaring EEC membership a betrayal of the nation and calling for withdrawal.

Wilson backed the referendum as a political ploy designed to restore unity to Labour at a moment when it threatened to fracture into pro and anti-EEC camps, but once he embraced the referendum he began to promote it as a final test of British intent. Either the public would vote against EEC membership and maintain its World War II identity or it would approve the EEC and commit itself to Europe. Wilson argued that either choice would finally put an end to Britain's infighting and indecision, and consequently the nation's decades-long identity crisis. Thus, though the referendum had petty political origins, it quickly gained enormous symbolic value as the vehicle through which Britons could go over their leadership's head and choose the course that

their nation would take. The Wilson Government consciously promoted this interpretation, particularly in the informational pamphlets that it distributed to every home in Britain. In doing so, it framed the referendum as a watershed moment in British history – a moment in which the people could assert their ownership of British national identity. Wilson did not set out to do this, but once the train started rolling it could not be stopped. Wilson climbed aboard and claimed it as his own.

Origins of the Referendum

The referendum was conceived as a response to the perception that the British government forced the UK into the ECC against the will of the people. In 1970, Harold Wilson lost the national election to Edward Heath of the Conservative Party. Heath, building on the groundwork laid by Wilson in his negotiations with the European heads of state in 1967, promptly filed the UK's third application for entry into the EEC. In the years since the 1967 application, Charles De Gaulle stepped away from power and was replaced by the more Anglo-friendly Georges Pompidou as President of France. Without De Gaulle there to say "Non," Britain finally joined the European Economic Community in 1972. The public, however, remained deeply divided. A Gallup poll from January 1975 – just after the referendum was officially announced – reported that fifty-five percent of respondents were in favor of withdrawing from the EEC. Forty-five percent wished to remain inside.²

This division extended to Wilson's Labour Party, which despite falling in with Wilson's pro-Europe stance in 1967 became fiercely opposed to British membership in

² Andrew Mullen and Brian Burkitt, "Spinning Europe: Pro-European Union Propaganda Campaigns in Britain, 1962-1975," *Political Quarterly*, 1 January 2005, p. 107

the EEC while out of power from 1970 to 1974. In his memoirs, Wilson characterized this time as “a miserably unhappy period.”³ He was still Leader of the Labour Party, but the Party was rebelling. Tony Benn, an influential Member of Parliament and champion of the far-left who served as Chairman of the Labour Party for a year between 1971 and 1972, was the de facto leader of the “anti-marketeters” – the wing of the party opposed to EEC membership. Benn led the charge in declaring that Heath sold Britain down the river to Europe by accepting terms less favorable to the UK than the ones that Wilson had been negotiating in 1967.

In particular, Benn attacked the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), a mandatory system for EEC members that established standard minimum prices for agriculture, imposed tariffs on agricultural imports from outside the EEC, and provided major subsidies to farms in EEC member states. In 1970, seventy percent of the EEC’s budget was spent on the CAP.⁴ Benn and the anti-marketeters argued that the fixed prices imposed by the CAP would increase food prices in the UK and that Britain would not benefit from the associated subsidies due to its relatively small agriculture industry compared to those of the other EEC member states. The result would be a rise in the British standard of living with little accompanying benefit.

At this time, Labour endorsed the idea of a public referendum as a means of deferring the EEC decision to the public. The idea for the referendum originally came from the “Euro sceptic” wing of the Conservative Party, which proposed the referendum to Parliament in 1969. The proposal failed, with only 55 Members of Parliament voting

³ Harold Wilson, *Final Term: The Labour Government 1974-1976*, (London: Ebenezer Baylis and Son Ltd., 1979), p. 51

⁴ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 307

in its favor.⁵ After the Tories failed to make the referendum a reality, in 1972 the anti-marketeters in Labour embraced the idea as a political weapon. Their goal was first and foremost to damage Edward Heath's Conservative government, which was criticized for accepting terms of entry that were disadvantageous to Britain.⁶ The anti-marketeters viewed the referendum as little more than a way to embarrass their opposition. Wilson, standing strong in his conviction that Britain's future was inside the EEC (though its entry terms should be renegotiated), at first resisted the calls for referendum. In 1973, however, he saw an opportunity.

In a bid to maintain control of his party, Wilson worked with Judith Hart – a well-respected MP – in crafting a statement on Labour's position on the EEC to be included in the Party's 1973 electoral platform. The statement was designed to appease the anti-marketeters by stating that Labour “*opposes* British membership of the European Communities on the terms negotiated by the Conservative Government,” but supports continued British membership in the EEC under renegotiated conditions.⁷ The statement laid out specific goals for renegotiation, including “major changes in the Common Agricultural Policy” as well as “new and fairer methods of financing the Community budget.” Most importantly, the proposal ended by declaring that “if renegotiations are successful... in view of the unique importance of the decision, the people should have the right to decide the issue.”⁸ Wilson submitted the program to the Labour Party's autumn 1973 conference. Though it required Wilson to threaten

⁵ Jan-Henrik Meyer, *The 1975 Referendum on Britain's Continued Membership in the EEC*, (Mainz: Institut für Europäische Geschichte, 2005), p. 2

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Harold Wilson, *Final Term: The Labour Government 1974-1976*, (London: Ebenezer Baylis and Son Ltd., 1979), p. 52

⁸ *ibid*

resignation and a subsequent Party leadership struggle on the eve of an election, the National Executive Committee – Labour’s leadership body – eventually approved the formula by a vote of 14 to 11.⁹ It was incorporated into *Labour’s Programme 1973* – the Party’s official public platform document.

Wilson embraced the referendum as a matter of managing his party, but it quickly became much more. Bernard Donoghue, a senior policy advisor for Wilson at the time, later wrote that Wilson’s objectives were “to prevent Labour from inescapably committing itself to withdrawal from the EEC, and from breaking up the Party over the issue.”¹⁰ By embracing the referendum and committing himself to promoting the “Yes” vote, Wilson hoped to take what the anti-marketeters had planned as a weapon against the Tories and turn it into a weapon against the anti-marketeters, all while seemingly giving them what they wanted. However, though it started as a clever political tactic, once embraced it became much more significant.

From the beginning, Wilson framed the referendum as a symbolic deference to the British public. As there was no popular sovereignty in the British political system, the referendum could never be legally required or technically binding. However, the issue of Britain joining with Europe was billed as a matter of such importance to Britain that even Parliament could not adequately speak for the people. As Wilson presented the referendum, the question of joining with Europe was bigger than the government, bigger than British law, and bigger than tradition. It was a matter of principle that only the people themselves could answer, despite there being no precedent and no legal

⁹ *ibid*, p. 54

¹⁰ Bernard Donoghue, “The Inside View from No. 10,” *The 1975 Referendum on Europe, Volume 1: Reflections of the Participants*, Mark Baimbridge (ed.), (Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2007), p. 128

justification for a referendum. Unsurprisingly, the questionable constitutionality of the referendum did not go unnoticed by the Conservative opposition.

The Fight for the Referendum

When Wilson returned to the office of the Prime Minister in 1970, one of his first orders of business was to follow through on the promises of *Labour's Programme 1973* by meeting with the other European leaders and renegotiating Britain's EEC membership terms. The renegotiations, though they fell short of Wilson's ambitious goals, were fruitful enough for Wilson to declare them a success. Wilson did not disclose the new terms, however, until March 1975 – two months after he declared success and announced his intention to plan the referendum.

When he finally revealed the terms, in a White Paper titled *Membership of the European Community: Report on Renegotiation*, it was in vague language. The White Paper reported that “CAP price levels have been held down in real terms; progress has been made towards relating them more closely to the needs of efficient producers, and towards securing a better balance between supply and demand.”¹¹ The paper did not disclose the details of this “progress” beyond asserting that the European Commission was reappraising the CAP and had recently submitted a report that “holds out prospects both of further progress on the lines already advocated by the Government and of other improvements which can be welcomed.”¹² The White Paper was written as vaguely as possible for a reason: no specific agreements were made between Wilson and the other European leaders as to modifying the CAP – only an agreement to consider revision at

¹¹ *Membership of the European Community, Report on Renegotiation*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975), paragraph 9

¹² *ibid*, paragraph 29

the CAP's next scheduled periodic reappraisal.¹³ Wilson was likely wary of emphasizing the achievements of his renegotiations, only to have it come out that they contained few concrete changes. Nevertheless, the promise of future European flexibility was enough for Wilson to move forward with the referendum.

In the early stages of planning the referendum, debate in Parliament focused largely on the referendum's implications for Parliamentary sovereignty. On January 23, 1975, Wilson delivered a speech in Parliament in which he officially announced the Government's decision to hold a referendum. At that point, the renegotiations were not yet complete and Wilson refused to officially support continued EEC membership. He merely discussed the logistics of the referendum. Early in his speech, he was interrupted by Edward Heath – the man that Wilson had recently unseated as Prime Minister. Heath called the referendum a “major constitutional innovation” and asked Wilson to “confirm that the referendum, if it takes place, will be advisory and consultative and cannot be binding on Members of the House of the Commons.”¹⁴ Wilson responded that he “cannot imagine that if the country votes clearly one way or the other... honorable Members would feel able to go against that decision and vote against.”¹⁵ Heath pushed back: “Whatever he [Wilson] may judge the attitude of right honorable [Heath] and honorable Members to be, will he [Wilson] confirm that a referendum cannot be constitutionally binding on any Member of this House, and that it

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Hansard, vol. 884, col. 1748, 1975

¹⁵ *ibid*, col. 1749

remains for Parliament to decide, if it so wishes, after the referendum?"¹⁶ Wilson had the final word on the subject:

The right honorable Gentleman is, of course, right in the constitutional sense that no one can tell a Member of this House how to vote... In that sense, the referendum could not be binding. But I perhaps pay more attention to the views of the people in the country than the right honorable Gentleman... and I express the view that I could not imagine many honorable Members deciding to pit their own judgment in this matter against what has been the decision of the people of the country. That is just my view.¹⁷

On the surface, this retort reads as Wilson positioning himself as a populist leader well-attuned to the will people; however, it also shows him playing a much longer game. In speeches such as this, Wilson argued that in the matter of outlining a new national identity for Britain, the direct will of the British people was superior to British constitutional theory, or even to the British government. Wilson agreed with Heath's claim that the referendum was a constitutional "innovation" with no legal value; his response was to raise the stakes. British identity was the domain of the people, not of the Government. Thus, though the referendum technically had no teeth, in Wilson's reckoning it was the duty of Parliament to accept the people's will. Parliament may have been sovereign, but Britain lived in the people. With the referendum eventually approved, they were finally given the opportunity to decide Britain's future.

The Referendum Campaign

During the brief three months of the official referendum campaign, British public opinion swung from being narrowly opposed to the EEC to resoundingly in favor of continued membership. A Gallup poll in January 1975 reported that fifty-five percent of the British public wanted to withdraw from the EEC while forty-five percent supported

¹⁶ *ibid*, col. 1751

¹⁷ *ibid*

membership; at the end of March, Gallup reported that sixty-six percent now supported membership with thirty-four percent opposed.¹⁸ Many factors contributed to this dramatic reversal. The pro-market side's resource advantage was gone such factor.

Though the Government gave the "Yes" and "No" campaigns equal starting resources, the "Yes" campaign – which supported remaining in the EEC – was able to create a substantially larger operation. The "Yes" and "No" campaigns centered around two organizations: Britain in Europe (BIE), as indicated by its name, supported continued EEC membership; the National Referendum Campaign (NRC) was its opposite number. Both of these organizations were given £125,000 by the Government to conduct their campaigns and publish informational materials. BIE, however, was able to raise another £1.8 million, primarily from pro-Europe businesses excited by the thought of having unlimited access to the European market. The NRC only raised an additional £8,610.¹⁹ The relative scale of the two organizations reflected this monetary discrepancy. The BIE had 163 official paid employees; the NRC had six.²⁰ Finally, both organizations published and distributed pamphlets advocating their respective positions. These pamphlets, with the help of the Government, were distributed to every house in every town in Britain. The Government, however, released its own pamphlet advocating EEC membership as well.²¹ Thus, the average Briton received two pamphlets in favor of voting "Yes" – one of them carrying the seal of the Government – and only one in favor of voting "No." Taken together, these facts indicate that at least part of the "Yes" campaign's success can be credited to its ability to outspend and outwork the

¹⁸ Andy Mullen and Brian Burkitt, "Spinning Europe: Pro-European Union Propaganda Campaigns in Britain, 1962-1975," *Political Quarterly*, January 1, 2005, p. 109

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 108

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*, p. 107

competition. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine a campaign propaganda advantage alone accounting for a twenty-one point swing in poll numbers in just three months. The “Yes” campaign’s economic advantage only worked because it was used to promote a message that resonated with the British people.

The best place to examine that message is in the Government pamphlet sent to every household in Britain. That pamphlet, titled “Britain’s New Deal in Europe,” was the centerpiece of the “Yes” campaign. It began with a letter from Wilson that emphasized the historic nature of the decision and closed with the statement, “Above all, I ask you to use your vote. For it is *your* vote that will now decide. The Government will accept *your* verdict.”²² The next section, headed “Your Right to Choose,” reminded readers: “The British people were promised the right to decide through the ballot box whether or not we should stay in the Common Market on new terms. And that the Government would abide by the result... The Government have recommended that Britain should stay in... But you have the right to choose.”²³ Before the pamphlet even presented an argument for why readers should vote to stay in the EEC, it devoted its first two sections to again emphasizing that this was a choice for the people, not the Government. The pamphlet made no mention of the questionable constitutionality of the referendum. Quite the opposite, it asserted multiple times that the people’s decision would be binding. Wilson’s concession to Heath in Parliament that the referendum could not be constitutionally binding was deemed an unimportant technicality. Again, the Wilson government sent the clear message that despite centuries of tradition, the British people – not Parliament – had the ultimate say in determining Britain’s future.

²² *Britain’s New Deal in Europe*, Issued by HM Government, 1975, p. 2

²³ *ibid*, p. 3-4

Finally, on page five, the pamphlet began to present its argument for EEC membership, though its specifics were even vaguer than those in the White Paper that was earlier circulated in Parliament. The pamphlet described the aims of the EEC as “To bring together the peoples of Europe” and “To help maintain peace and freedom.”²⁴ In a section titled “The New Deal,” the pamphlet quotes Wilson in saying that “I believe that our renegotiation objectives have been substantially though not completely achieved.” In describing those achievements, however, it simply says that “the Common Agricultural policy... now works more flexibly to the benefit of both housewives and farmers in Britain.” The only specifics it cites are “special arrangements made for sugar and beef,” without saying what those arrangements are.²⁵ To counteract the argument that staying in the EEC would be a betrayal of the Commonwealth, the pamphlet quoted statements of support for the EEC from the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand.²⁶ Responding to fears that the EEC would strip away British sovereignty, the pamphlet reminded readers that “in the modern world even the Super Powers... do not have complete freedom of action. Medium-sized nations like Britain are more and more subject to economic and political forces we cannot control on our own.”²⁷

Finally, the pamphlet painted two scenarios of the future: one for “If We Say ‘No’” and one for “If We Say ‘Yes.’” The “No” scenario was bleak. “The Common Market will not go away if we say ‘No,’” the pamphlet argued, “We would just be outsiders looking in.”²⁸ The “Yes” scenario, on the other hand, depicted a world in which life would still be tough in Britain, but it would have access to Europe’s markets, incoming European

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 5

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 6-7

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 10

²⁷ *ibid*, p. 11-12

²⁸ *ibid*, p. 13

Community money, and the ability to play a role in setting the policies of what the writers called the “world’s most powerful trading bloc.”²⁹ This final point was at the heart of the pamphlet’s pro-EEC argument.

As framed by the Wilson government, the referendum was a choice between Britain being something greater than itself or remaining a chain of islands in the Atlantic inching ever closer to isolation; between staying in the present or entering an unknown, exciting future. Only Britons could make that choice. The pamphlet urged them to vote “Yes,” but concluded with ten empowering words: “The choice is up to YOU. It is YOUR decision.”³⁰

This constant emphasis on the agency of the voters seems like a psychological ploy – a way to make Britons feel like they had control – but the fact is that Britons truly *were* in control. Wilson’s commitment to the referendum was a gamble. He placed his reputation – and likely his leadership – on the line in order to keep his party together and finally force Britain off the fence that it had been sitting on for decades. By arguing that the referendum should be upheld as a matter of principle though it was not constitutionally binding, Wilson locked himself into submitting to the will of the people, whatever it may be. What started for Wilson as a political ploy turned into a full-scale assault on Parliamentary sovereignty. The referendum symbolized that Britain’s identity did not live in Parliament; it did not live in British tradition; it did not even live in the Queen. It lived in the British people.

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 14

³⁰ *ibid*, p. 15

On June 5, 1975, the citizens of the UK were asked the question: “Do you think that the United Kingdom should stay in the European Community (The Common Market)?” Approximately 40,086,000 Britons voted – a 64% turnout. The results were conclusive: 67.2% voted “Yes” to remaining in the EEC; 32.8% voted no.³¹ All four parts of the United Kingdom – England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland – reported a majority for the “Yes” vote, with the widest margin in England (68.7% vs. 31.3%) and the narrowest in Northern Ireland (52.1% vs. 47.9%). The people had spoken. They had much more to say, however, than could ever be reflected in a simple “Yes” or “No.” An examination of the public discourse leading up the referendum reveals just how painful a process it was for Britons to embrace Europe, but that they did it all the same.

³¹ Richard M. Scammon, “International Election Notes: British Common Market Referendum of June 5, 1975,” *World Affairs*, Vol. 138, No. 1 (Summer 1975), p. 69.

Chapter Four

England's Dreaming: The 1975 Referendum in Public Discourse

God Save the Queen, we mean it man; and there is no future in England's dreaming.

-The Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen*, 1977

During the three months of the 1975 EEC referendum campaign – and particularly during May, the final full month – British regional newspapers were inundated with a flood of letters from common Britons weighing in on the nation's great debate. These letters differed from the similar influx of letters during the 1967 debate. In 1967, most letter writers opposed EEC membership. By 1975, most favored joining the EEC. The memory of World War II loomed large in both batches of letters. However, in 1967 it was almost exclusively a rationale for keeping out of Europe. Britons didn't need Europe in the 1940s, the argument went; why would they need it now?

In 1975, that interpretation of World War still lingered for some, but others now contested it. A new narrative was taking form that stressed that World War II was in fact about ending Europe's history of nationalistic infighting once and for all. The EEC, then, was a direct extension of the legacy of World War II – it was the binding together of Europe to ensure that the horrors of that war would never be repeated.

Britons contested another dominant narrative from 1967 in the 1975 public debate: the myth of British resilience. In the 1967, the narrative of British toughness – that the British Bulldog could take on the world alone and that joining with Europe was a sign of weakness – was the sole domain of the anti-marketeters. In 1975, the pro-

marketeers subverted that narrative. The anti-marketeers were the cowards in the new narrative, afraid that Britain would be unable to compete with the rest of Europe on an even footing. True British toughness would be having the backbone to stay in the EEC; not just competing in the European market, but leading it into a new age of prosperity.

Finally, Britons once again debated the subject of British sovereignty, but this time the debate was complicated by the referendum itself. The 1967 narrative that the EEC would allow Europe to dominate the UK and erode its national sovereignty was still intact in 1975 – though the fact that Britain had already been a member of the EEC for three years and the Queen was not yet in shackles made that argument less prominent. In 1975, however, the argument had a counterpoint. The referendum that would allow Britons to leave the EEC – originally proposed by anti-marketeers – was, supporters argued, itself a violation of Parliamentary sovereignty. Voting against the EEC in the referendum, and thereby overruling Parliament, would violate the basic tenets of the British constitution. In the words of one letter-writer from Sutton Coldfield, if the objective was to preserve traditional British sovereignty, the situation was “Heads I win, tails you lose.”¹ The true choice facing Britons, then, was not between sovereignty and European domination, but between two different avenues for undermining traditional Parliamentary sovereignty.

The 1975 public debate focused on the same general themes as the 1967 debate, but in 1975 they were subverted and contested to suit the needs of a population that, spurred on by their government’s failure to improve their quality of life or restore British international prestige, was finally ready to move toward a new Britain. All of the

¹ J. J. York, Sutton Coldfield, “...Terrified,” *The Birmingham Post*, May 9, 1975, Letters to the Editor

same anti-Europe arguments were mounted, but they were a statistical minority even among the small group of voters who were motivated enough to write in to their local newspapers. Far more common were the letters in which writers embraced a new narrative British history in order to create a new future. The past will always be a part of the present, but in 1975 Britons proved that the past can be malleable. They were ready to wake up from England's dreaming.

By subtly shifting the narrative of their past, Britons transformed their history from a force that defended the status quo into a force for change. If the 1967 debate proved that history can be a powerful causal force, the 1975 referendum proved that it can also be marshaled as a vital tool in framing large political departures. History can be a controlling factor, but given enough motivation it can also be controlled. This chapter will examine that process at work in the original words of those who voted in the 1975 referendum.

Going It Alone: Independence or Isolation?

Four centuries ago, John Donne wrote "No man is an island, entire of itself; everyman is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main." Today we can say with equal certainty that no country is an island entire of itself no matter how much water surrounds it.²

-John Laure, 24, Oakdale Close, Downend, Bristol, 1975

Free from the ties of bureaucracy we can as individuals still show the spirit of the British Bulldog. Certainly there is nothing wrong in this country that the British people cannot rectify, given the opportunity.³

-Denis C. Barrett, Birmingham 90, 1975

² John Laure, 24, Oakdale Close, Downend, Bristol, "A chance to be positive," *Evening Post*, May 20, 1975, Voice of the West

³ Denis C. Barrett, Birmingham 90, "Referendum is key to survival," *Birmingham Post*, June 2, 1975, Letters to the Editor

In the months leading up to the 1975 referendum, Britons debated what it meant for their nation to be an island – literal and metaphorical. The two letters excerpted above represented the two extremes of the argument. Britain had long been on an independent course. As an island without the national resources to maintain its large, modern population, it had always been dependent on the imports of other nations. However, those other nations were traditionally former British colonies – primarily the Commonwealth nations and the United States. As such, they were part of Britain’s extended family and fit into Britain’s framework of perceived independence.⁴ Joining the EEC, however, meant recognizing – and codifying – British dependence on states other than its family members. In 1967, this caused outrage. By 1975, many had accepted it as a fact of life.

A letter from S. Mitchell in the *Evening Post* summarized the mood well. Advocating for a “Yes” vote in the referendum, Mitchell wrote: “These islands have, of course, always been ‘specks on the globe,’ and for years I had marveled at the fact that we held sway over a quarter of the globe. But things are different now. We cannot ‘push outward’ and discover new lands and colonise a quarter of the world, which made these ‘small specks of ours’ a force to be reckoned with...”⁵ Mitchell’s words hold a sense of resignation. In his reckoning, the Empire was almost a fluke – something to be proud of, but something that was forever lost. Britain was, in fact, dependent on other countries. Britain’s EEC membership was simply a recognition of reality.

⁴ Though the United States had rebelled against Britain, it was linked almost as strongly as the Commonwealth nations by way of the “special relationship.”

⁵ S. Mitchell, 6, Barnstaple Walk, Knowle, Bristol 4, “We cannot stand alone,” *Evening Post*, May 21, 1975, Voice of the West

Alison Tyler reflected that same resignation in her letter to the *Birmingham Post*. “Personally, I find it hard to see a future for Britain at all,” she lamented. “But I do think that if we have a future, it is to be found within the EEC.” She concluded her letter with a call for Britons to open their eyes to reality: “There is no [time] now for empire building mythology and narrow-minded nationalism; we are unable to go it alone... united [with Europe] we will have more influence and can press for better conditions.”⁶ Tyler’s comments demonstrated a self-awareness that did not seem to exist in 1967. In identifying and denouncing a British “mythology,” Tyler consciously recognized the influence of history on past EEC debates and sought to excise it from the present. Michael Steel picked up on this same thread in a different letter when he wrote: “It is a destructive mixture of pride and possessiveness which makes it difficult for a people with a history like ours to make any compromise with other nations for the common good.”⁷ Not every pro-Europe letter-writer grappled with historical memory so directly, but even those who did not helped to shift Britain’s relationship with its past by implicitly embracing the new narrative.

Tyler’s letter featured another common argument: that the EEC was a reality whether Britain liked it or not, and that the only way for Britain to influence its policies was from the inside. “We know that at present the EEC is far from perfect,” wrote T. H. Fowler of Redditch. “Could we not help to shape its future development and help mould both the political and economic ideals? We shan’t do so by remaining in isolation.”⁸

⁶ (Miss) Alison R. Tyler, Solihull, “...Hope within,” *Birmingham Post*, April 17, 1975, Letters to the Editor

⁷ Michael Steel, Chairman, Weston-super-Mare Constituency Liberal Association, 5, Ashleigh Crescent, Yatton, Avon, “Hard to compromise,” *Evening Post*, May 23, 1975, Voice of the West

⁸ T. H. Fowler, Redditch, “Common Market referendum,” *Birmingham Post*, April 15, 1975, Letters to the Editor

Tyler called for Britons to be proactive in changing the EEC to better suit their needs, rather than being reactive and insular by quitting the EEC.

Arguments such as these took the resignation exhibited in letters above and made it into something constructive. Accepting a smaller world role did not mean abandoning all influence on the world, these writers argued. To the contrary, by working on a smaller, more realistic scale, Britain could be more effective in pursuing its world interests than it had been since before World War II. Bristol's Betty Letts made this exact point when she wrote: "What Britain has lost in her Empire she can regain as a dominant and respected influence in Europe, and see her humanitarian policies applied world wide."⁹ Alan Lawson, an insurance broker, went straight to the heart of this line of argument in a *Birmingham Post* column called "The Post Six," in which the *Post* asked six "regular" people to give their views on the referendum each week for the month leading up to the vote. "We have lost an empire, and for the last thirty years we have been looking for a role in the world. I wonder if this is it," he opined.¹⁰

Lawson spoke for many, but not for all. Peter Hollingsworth, in a letter printed on April 14, launched a direct attack on the argument that Britain must accept its dependence on other nations. "We have always been a small collection of islands," he wrote. "We thrive when the odds appear against us... I am confident the British people will choose to stay independent."¹¹ Lawson's argument for "independence" was echoed by many. D. A. Gordon wrote: "The referendum is an opportunity to recall our

⁹ Mrs. Betty M. Letts, Beresford Cottage, 1, Clifton Hill, Bristol BS8 1BP, "Market Reality," *Evening Post*, May 16, 1975, Voice of the West

¹⁰ Mr. Alan Lawson, "The Post Six on sovereignty," *Birmingham Post*, The Post Six, May 13, 1975

¹¹ Peter Hollingsworth, Birmingham 17, "Confident, From Coun. P. J. Hollingsworth Birmingham," *Birmingham Post*, April 14, 1975, Letters to the Editor

independence and to make a start to regain our self respect.”¹² Gordon’s tying together of “independence” and “self-respect” is important. The link between British international superiority and Britons’ personal sense of meaning – so present in the 1967 debate – was still alive and well for at least some voters in the 1975 referendum.

For many letter-writers, British independence and self-respect were so closely tied that they felt a deep sense of betrayal and shame toward their country for steering them into the EEC in the first place. “If we are not man enough to put our house in order alone,” wrote Richard Elliott, “we will forever bow our heads in shame as the white beggar of Europe.”¹³ Elliott wanted Britain to work out its problems alone before it joined with *any* international agreement, EEC or otherwise. To do anything else would be to accept charity – in Elliott’s reckoning, something of which Britons should be ashamed.

The “independence” argument did not go unchallenged. Some, such as Perry Barr’s A. Crossley, turned the anti-marketeers’ narrative of British “toughness” against them. To the anti-marketeers, Britain had no need for Europe, such was the toughness of its inner bulldog. Crossley, however, argued that that same bulldog demanded that Britain test its mettle by competing with Europe in the EEC. “Are we so spineless, so lacking in our ability to compete that we must run away from Europe and take refuge behind a tariff wall?” he asked.¹⁴ Pro-marketeers also commonly refuted the “independence” argument by responding that independence went hand-in-hand with a continued downward spiral. A perfect example of this line of thinking came from Peter

¹² D. A. Gordon, Beresford House, 1, Clifton Hill, Bristol BS8, “Punishes the poor,” *Evening Post*, May 30, 1975, Voice of the West

¹³ Richard Elliott, Birmingham 20, “Not yet fit,” *Birmingham Post*, Letters to the Editor, June 5, 1975

¹⁴ A. Crossley, Perry Barr, Birmingham, “...Shaming,” *Birmingham Post*, May 6, 1975, Letters to the Editor

Corrigan, who wrote: “If we came out of the Common Market we would be ‘independent’ – to govern a siege economy and a steadily decreasing standard of living. Would those who died in two world wars and those who love their country say this is a price they would pay for ‘independence?’”¹⁵ Corrigan’s letter not only refuted the “toughness” narrative, but challenged the anti-marketeers’ control over what had long been their exclusive territory: the legacy of World War II.

The Battle for World War II

The legacy of World War II, once a unifying national myth, was contested in 1975. For many, the wounds were still sore and trusting Europe still impossible. Councillor Richard Reynolds of Wolverhampton was one such individual. “Let the pro-marketeers be in no doubt that Germany will be the predominant nation in the EEC,” he wrote. “Why should we be defeated by them now, by back-door methods, when so much blood was shed to defeat the regime that ruled in that country thirty years ago?”¹⁶ S. T. Perrens made a slightly different argument. Rather than worry about German domination, Perrens expressed a distaste for French ambition. Nevertheless, the language was still colored by World War II: “...one thing people seem to have forgotten. If it had not been for Britain in 1940 there would not have been a France... They owe us their existence and we should not allow France to dictate to us what we shall do or not do.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Peter Corrigan, 89, Northover Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol, “Points to the ‘Post’,” *Evening Post*, May 4, 1975, Voice of the West

¹⁶ Richard Reynolds (Councillor), 5 Stanford Road, Wolverhampton, “Rich man’s club,” *Express & Star*, May 1, 1975, Letters to the Editor

¹⁷ S. T. Perrens, 80 Rydal Green, Willenhall Road, Wolverhampton, “We saved Europe,” *Express & Star*, June 2, 1975, Letters to the Editor

To these writers, the battles of World War II were still taking place. Britain was still the savior of Europe, and Germany was still on the march. An anonymous writer to the *Liverpool Daily Post* warned that the EEC represented “a great peril... [another] invasion of Europe.”¹⁸ However, while this view was the norm in 1967, in 1975 it appeared with much less frequency. Opinions such as the following were more common: “Those of us who recall the state of post war Europe require no other reason for pushing towards unity in a continent which tore itself to pieces with sickening regularity. For behind the European aspirations of the 1970s lie the ruins of the 1940s and the determination that nothing like the events of 1939 to 1945 shall ever occur again.”¹⁹ In this letter and those like it, the pro-marketeters set out to reclaim the legacy of World War II for the European integration movement, and for at least the months leading up to the 1975 referendum they were largely successful.

Pro-marketeters did not stop at reclaiming World War II; they often went much further back in British history in order to establish a narrative in which European integration was the next phase of an ongoing process. Two prime examples are the letters of L. W. Wilson of Edgbaston and G. F. Elvins of Birmingham. Wilson wrote:

...we should remember that this country was once made up of seven separate kingdoms... Yet who could now seriously wish that the seven kingdoms were still in existence carrying on their recurring wars against each other instead of football and cricket contests between the counties. Will not future generations wonder for the same reason how we ever hesitated to remain part of the United States of Europe?²⁰

¹⁸ “Market Forum – Another invasion,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, Market Forum, May 29, 1975

¹⁹ A. Walker Hall, 303 Wolverhampton Road, West, Willenhall, “United against war,” *Express & Star*, June 2, 1975, Letters to the Editor

²⁰ L. W. Wilson, Edgbaston, Birmingham 15, “From a united kingdom to a united Europe,” *Birmingham Post*, May 31, 1975, Letters to the Editor

On a similar note, Elvins argued that “the basic reason for remaining in the EEC is one of historic evolution which should not be impeded... One combines first with one’s neighbours, then as a group with similar groups, until eventually the whole world is one.”²¹ These letters were idealistic and likely not representative of the larger population, but they show just how much Britain’s history was being contested in the 1975 debate. The anti-marketeers went sometimes back just as far into Britain’s past, as in the case of one writer who asserted that the Magna Carta would be “mangled into obscurity” by the EEC.²²

History was the battleground, and for the three months of 1975 it was in flux. Britons were about to vote on a new future, and in doing so they were faced with forming a new narrative of their past. History, however, was not the only field being contested.

Sovereignty and Constitutionality

In the 1975 referendum debate, the pro-marketeers did not refute their opposition’s claim that joining the EEC meant sacrificing British sovereignty; rather, they countered that the referendum was doing the exact same thing. A version of the basic anti-marketeer talking point can be found in a letter by one Alan Meadowcroft: “If we become members of the federal state to be made from the EEC, we will have superimposed on our monarchical constitution a European presidential system. The Queen will become the mere subject of a European president... Every part of our

²¹ G. F. Elvins, Birmingham 45, “...Moral sin,” *Birmingham Post*, June 3, 1975, Letters to the Editor

²² Denis C. Barrett, Birmingham 90, “Referendum is key to survival,” *Birmingham Post*, June 2, 1975, Letters to the Editor

constitution will be debased if the European entanglement continues.”²³ The common pro-marketeer response, as put forth in an editorial that expressed the official opinion of the *Evening Post*: “On loss of sovereignty by our Parliament we agree that there must be some give, as in any partnership, but would be more impressed by those who are trying to scare us about it if they were not led by precisely those who are weakening Parliament by foisting a referendum on us.”²⁴ From those foundational points, the debate took on many different permutations.

J. J. York of Sutton Coldfield also expressed the issue clearly:

It would appear that many anti-Marketeers are terrified of a loss of sovereignty caused by our continuing membership of the EEC. However, it would also seem that these people are the strongest supporters of that constitutional disaster, the referendum, which is, by its very existence, a far greater loss of sovereignty, should the result be held as binding on Parliament as most anti-Marketeers wish.²⁵

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the answer to the question of whether the referendum would be binding was both yes and no. As a matter of law, Wilson conceded that it would not be constitutionally binding. Nevertheless, he declared that it as a matter of principal, the Government would accept the peoples’ choice. Thus, it was de facto binding. Given Britain’s unwritten constitution, the distinction was not much more than a matter of rhetoric.

Many, both pro and anti-marketeers, objected to the referendum not simply on constitutional grounds, but because they felt that the public did not know enough about the issues at stake. “Ordinary people are not capable of assessing the intricacies of the economic problems involved,” wrote a Hinckley resident. “The majority of people do

²³ Alan Meadowcroft, 49 Verney Road, Royton, Oldham, Lancashire, “Sovereign rights lost,” *Express & Star*, May 30, 1975, Letters to the Editor

²⁴ Editorial Staff, “Yes – a vote for vision,” *Evening Post*, May 4, 1975

²⁵ J. J. York, Sutton Coldfield, “...Terrified,” *The Birmingham Post*, May 9, 1975, Letters to the Editor

not wish to have the referendum because these are matters which should be left to Parliament.”²⁶ Other writers took a different tack, arguing that sovereignty was no use if Britain was not powerful enough to wield it. One Briton asked: “What is sovereignty without power or dominion? ...I don’t think we shall be important outside [Europe], because we are weak and divided – and what use would our national sovereignty be then?”²⁷ This writer would preferred to have seen a powerful Britain capable of exerting its influence on the world than a weak Britain that preserved its national sovereignty but faded into international obscurity. The recurring appearance of this pragmatic approach to sovereignty demonstrated the lengths to which some Britons were willing to go find a new future for their struggling country. To return Britain to relevance, they were consciously willing to bring down everything that conventionally defined Britain.

The anti-marketeters, in rebuttal, argued that though the referendum was a violation of Parliamentary sovereignty, it was nevertheless the lesser of two evils. G. E. Lillywhite of Cheltenham took this tack in a letter from April 17: “[Politicians] must again inform and consult their electors as they should always have done, but have now ceased to do... Until we return to this closer liaison, which should be the normal process, to talk of constitutional methods and democratic institutions is hypocrisy.”²⁸ For Lillywhite, the ideal of Parliamentary sovereignty was already lost when Parliament grew out of touch with the population. The referendum was merely an attempt to force Parliament to once again listen to the people. Gerald Glynn of Erdington expressed the same sentiment in a sly letter that evoked English satirist W. S. Gilbert: “Gilbert would

²⁶ A. J. Barnes, Hinckley, “Labour moderates must join Wilson,” *Birmingham Post*, April 7, 1975, Letters to the Editor

²⁷ Miss Anne Scott, “The Post Six on sovereignty,” *Birmingham Post*, May 13, 1975, The Post Six

²⁸ G. E. Lillywhite, Cheltenham, “Why politicians fear the EEC referendum,” *Birmingham Post*, April 17, 1975, Letters to the Editor

have loved that – [politicians] trying to persuade us that a course of action [the referendum] ‘affronts Parliamentary sovereignty’ when that precise action is, in fact, the only means left to the people of this country to ensure a continuance of that sovereignty.”²⁹

In fighting over sovereignty in 1975, both sides of the debate recognized that this moment was a turning point for traditional British notions of Parliamentary sovereignty. Either Britain’s first national public referendum would overrule Parliament and make the term “Parliamentary sovereignty” meaningless, or Britain would remain in the EEC and forfeit an unforeseeable degree of its national independence. Either way, there was no going back, but such was the enormity of the choice that Britons had to make. Britain *would* change; it was simply a matter of how.

In the months leading up to the 1975 referendum, Britons grappled with their past as a means of determining their future. They contested the nature of British independence and British toughness; they contested the legacy of World War II; they contested what it meant to be British. Ultimately, after hundreds of pages of words had been poured onto the pages of newspapers across the country, Britain’s decades-long identity crisis came down to a single vote. By a majority of 67.2%, Britons voted in favor of a new European identity, and in doing so a break from their past.

In 1975, Britons overcame a national identity that had held sway on British politics since World War II. As their own words show, they did this by marshaling their history in order to create a new narrative of their past. History is not a set of facts; it is

²⁹ Gerald Glynn, Erdington, Birmingham 24, “A Gilbertian situation over Common Market,” *Birmingham Post*, April 16, 1975, Letters to the Editor

the connective tissue between those facts that gives them shape and tells a story. By telling a different story, Britons suggested a different ending. Their achievement did not mark the end of Britain's struggle to define itself. Rather, it demonstrated that national identity is in a state of flux, and when the moment is right it can be shifted in ways that change how a state behaves. Harold Wilson's decision to call the bluff of Parliamentary sovereignty made this possible in Britain. No matter how old and storied a nation's institutions, its identity always lives in its people.

Conclusion

The Song Remains the Same

The British Empire may have vanished from the map, but it has not entirely vanished from the mind.

-David Cannadine, 2001

In the autumn of 2011, Sir Salman Rushdie delivered a convocation lecture at Oberlin College. In that speech, he expounded upon an axiom credited to Heraclitus: “character is destiny.” The truth of that statement, Rushdie argued, could be illustrated by Charles Schultz’s *Peanuts* gang – specifically, Lucy’s nasty habit of pulling the football away from Charlie Brown every time that he moves in for a kick. Charlie inevitably tumbles through the air and hurts himself, yet time and again he remains hopeful that *this* will be the moment that he finally kicks the ball. Yet, “if Charlie Brown successfully kicks the football,” Sir Rushdie said, “he ceases to be Charlie Brown.” If Charlie Brown’s role in the narrative changes, the character would fundamentally change with it. He would no longer be recognizable to his audience, his friends, or himself. If his function changed, he would lose his identity. Thankfully, Schultz never let such a thing happen.

But what would happen if, despite Sir Rushdie’s warning, Charlie Brown *were* to kick that football? Charlie gets lucky and makes contact. The football goes flying. He would no longer be “Charlie Brown,” so who would this new person be? How does that person react? What does that person become? Charlie Brown’s hypothetical dilemma is a stand-in for any individual or collective with a distinct identity that faces a moment of no return in which its defining identity is shorn away and it is left with the choice of

reinvention or descent into irrelevance. It is a question faced by every workaholic who retires or is let go, every obsessive parent whose children move away, and every long-term spouse who unwillingly faces divorce. It was also a question that faced the people of Great Britain after World War II, though they did not admit it for some time.

In many ways, however, Charlie Brown's football is still in the air. Britons voted to stay in the EEC in 1975, and in doing so showed that in that moment they had broken from their past and adopted a new national identity closer to Europe. They achieved this enormous feat by marshaling their history, just as the opponents of the EEC successfully did in 1967. Britons wrested their history from the grasp of Churchill's "Finest Hour" narrative and, following Harold Wilson's lead, forged a new narrative in which Britain was simply entering the next phase of the inevitable process of integration. By doing this, Britons proved that though history holds enormous influence on a nation's identity, it is not set in stone. National narratives can be contested; national identities can be changed. However, this state of constant flux cuts both ways. Shifts in national identity can be undone just as surely as they can be made. The 1975 Referendum did not resolve Britain's identity crisis; it merely marked a moment of momentary consensus.

While doing research for this thesis in London during the month of January 2012, I was surprised to find how many of the themes of my research still resonated in today's Britain. My time in London coincided with a tense moment in the Eurozone crisis that began in 2011, and the language with which Londoners spoke of the European Union was remarkably similar to the language used in 1967. One cabbie I spoke to referred to the austerity measures being imposed on the struggling Eurozone states by

Germany as “German boots back on the march.” Another referred to Britain’s membership in the EU as “nothing but sand being kicked in our face.” British newspapers ran opinion pieces ruing the day that Britain joined the EEC. The pieces that I read never once mentioned the 1975 referendum. It seems that many modern Britons would rather not remember that they voted overwhelmingly in favor of EEC membership in 1975, for then they would have no one to blame for their current troubles but themselves.

In the end, many of the flashpoints of the 1967 and 1975 EEC debates proved artificial. Charlie Brown kicked the football, but he remained Charlie Brown. Britons feared that by joining the EEC they would forfeit the Commonwealth, but the Commonwealth’s political ties last to this day, though its economic ties have weakened. They were convinced that the Queen would become nothing more than a smiling figurehead, but EEC membership had no bearing on that inevitability. They worried that Britain would become a subservient state in a federal Europe, but a half-century later the UK remains sovereign. In fact, the greatest threat to the preservation of the UK as of this writing is the Scottish independence movement, which has secured a referendum to be held in 2014 that will determine whether Scotland will remain in the UK. Considering that Great Britain was created by the union of England and Scotland in 1707, if Scotland becomes independent it will no longer make sense to speak of British national identity at all. The true danger to British national identity is fragmentation, not assimilation.

Britain’s identity crisis is unlikely to end any time soon. The great achievement of the 1975 referendum was that there is now more than one option. Britons created an

alternative narrative of their history, an alternative national identity, and an alternative vision of their future. They gave themselves a choice, and that choice has continued to face them anew every day since. As the Wilson Government constantly reminded voters in the lead-up to the referendum, the important thing is that the choice is in their hands and no one else's, though that can sometimes be difficult to remember. Every day is a new referendum.

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