

DON'T GAMBLE ON 1975

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Leading pro-euro politicians such as Peter Mandelson, Michael Heseltine and Charles Kennedy claim that a positive assessment of the five tests coupled with a strong lead from Tony Blair will lead people to vote 'Yes' in a euro referendum. To support their view, they make a superficial comparison with the experience of the 1975 referendum on the EEC while ignoring contrary evidence from other referendums. They are playing a dangerous game.

Could the euro referendum turn into the Labour Party's ERM?

Before backing Peter Mandelson's gamble, Labour MPs should scrutinise the facts. Once a positive assessment of the tests is given, there is no turning back from a referendum. But if public opinion remains opposed the Labour Party could find itself facing a disaster from which it might be difficult for the party to recover electorally. I believe that calling a referendum on the euro, even if public opinion was only marginally against joining (according to the latest ICM survey carried in March 2002 opinion is currently 55% - 33% against the euro) would be a high risk strategy for Labour and would most likely result in a substantial defeat for the 'Yes' side.

Big swings to 'Change' are rare during referendum campaigns

Unlike Mr Mandelson, I don't ignore the referendum experience around the world. There are many examples of campaigns that changed public opinion but few where big oppositions were overturned. The reason is simple. When faced with opposition on this scale, most Governments, where they have a choice, decide *against* holding a referendum.

That leaves just a handful of cases where Governments successfully held referendums which overturned huge public opposition. One example occurred in Spain in 1986 when the Government decided to confirm their membership of Nato. Another was the 1975 British referendum on staying in the EEC.

Look at 1975 – could it be more different?

In 1975 the Government was defending the status quo not, as it is now, proposing radical change. (I will explain in another note why the status-quo is so often a powerful referendum advantage). The pro-EEC campaign also included all the major political parties, an undivided business community and all of the media. The endorsement of the "establishment" was particularly important in persuading a relatively deferential electorate to change its mind.

Times have changed more than younger politicians may recognise. The media, a crucial element in the referendum process, is more demanding and critical of politicians in general and the Government in particular. It is also divided on the euro's merits (if it calls a referendum Labour will find itself on the wrong side of The Sun for the first time since 1997). The political establishment and the business community are also divided. And today's voters are far less deferential, better educated and much less inclined to trust the advice of politicians.

In addition, many voters who 25 years ago were drawn by the European ideal now seem disconnected from the institutions set up in its name. What worked in the referendum in 1975 cannot be relied upon to work today.

1975 was won before the referendum was ever held

The pro-EEC campaign hung on the perception that Harold Wilson had successfully renegotiated the European treaty in Britain's favour, thus making the status-quo even more attractive to the voter.

It was Wilson's success which was responsible for the move in public opinion towards staying in the EEC. But this move took place *before* the referendum campaign. By the time the campaign began the pro-EEC campaigners were well in the lead. (During the campaign itself there was in fact little movement in public opinion).

The plain fact is the theatricalities of Wilson's canter round the capitals of Europe spoke to far more of the electorate than the technicalities of the five tests ever will.

Mr Mandelson is so confident of victory that he believes the 'yes' campaign can go into the referendum behind in the polls and still win. This defies the lessons of recent referendums. Since 1975 only a quarter of 'yes' campaigns have managed to increase their lead in the opinion polls during the actual referendum campaign.

Watch out for mid-term blues

The pro-euro lobby is highly dependent on political leadership. Yet referendums do not occur in a political vacuum. The popularity of the government can help or hinder the result. The honeymoon of 1997 helped Labour win the Scottish referendum. Well into a second term things may look very different.

Referendums can be like by-elections. They offer the opportunity to criticise the government without disposing of it. Given there is no risk of reinstating the Tories it seems a dangerous moment to test volatile voters. In 1992 French President Mitterand hoped that a referendum win on the (popular) Maastricht Treaty would bolster his Government's popularity. In fact, the people took the opportunity to register their discontent with him and his Government and the referendum was almost lost (support for the Treaty fell from 75% to 51% during the campaign).

Is Mr Blair and his Cabinet still so popular that he can reverse Mr Mitterand's experience and bolster the referendum result? The low turn-out at the last election and the recent difficulties over public sector reform and Government sleaze suggest otherwise. "You trusted me on public services now trust me on the euro".

The real lessons of 1975 suggest that the Government would find it very difficult to win a referendum on the euro.

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