

Whose Europe is it Anyway? Media and Public Opinion

Quentin Peel

Thank you for inviting me – and congratulations to the AEJ UK branch on its 50th anniversary.

I have been asked to do three things: to take stock of the underlying forces that led to the Brexit vote; to analyse the role of the media in that process; and to suggest how the UK and EU can build a healthy future relationship.

The first formal European meeting I ever covered as a journalist was the 1984 European summit in Fontainebleau, where Margaret Thatcher won her budget rebate. From the perspective of the UK media, it was a triumphant success for the prime minister. Seen from the other nine member states, it was more of a grim compromise.

For me as a journalist, it was a terrifying occasion, with hundreds of strange faces milling around – officials and advisers, journalists and diplomats, and the very occasional distant face of a known politician. It was a ferociously complex subject, and a very steep learning curve.

I became FT bureau chief in Brussels three months later, and rapidly discovered that writing about Europe was both fascinating and challenging. It meant trying to understand the domestic politics of 10 different countries, and how they interacted to reach decisions. Much more interesting than just writing about one country – but also more complicated.

Writing for the FT was a big advantage. I had a business audience that wanted hard information, not entertainment or opinion. It was a global audience that wanted to understand Europe, not just the UK. And finally the FT was virtually the house magazine of the Brussels community.

In one way, reporting on the EU is easy: all information is easily available. It is a myth to think that everything is furtively decided behind closed doors. With 28 member states and three big EU institutions, there is always somebody to turn to for information. But they may not have the full story. Writing about Europe is like making a jigsaw puzzle: you need to get small pieces of a variety of sources to get the full picture. You soon find out that the small member states talk most and the big ones – including the UK – tend to be the most deceitful, if they can get away with it.

The trouble with Brussels is in selling the story to a newsdesk back in your national capital. The tendency is to take a narrow national attitude, when the story may well be much more pan-European. And I fear the British media have been amongst the most nationally obsessed over the years. For the generalised media in print, and for broadcasting, it is a hard sell to get the European story across if it does not have a strong national angle.

Not only are the Brits nationalistic. They tend to be most negative. Why? It goes back to the way in which we joined, I believe. For the UK, joining the EEC in 1973 was a defeat, not a victory. We had tried to make EFTA work as a free trade area, only to discover that the EEC economy was performing much better. Second, for most of the first decade after joining, the UK economy was declining. Virtually every other new member of the EU enjoyed a big economic boost. And third, the first time that the country and the media really focussed on Europe after we joined was for Thatcher's great budget battle: it was us against them, and that sense of constant confrontation never went away.

The UK media has always seen politics in Westminster terms – as a Punch and Judy show, with winners and losers. They could never grasp – or at least never enjoy reporting – the European way of forming coalitions and reaching compromises. To that black-and-white perception must be added

the fact that both leading parties at Westminster – Tories and Labour – were deeply split. The Labour hard left – including Jeremy Corbyn – was Eurosceptic, and the Conservative hard right was increasingly English nationalist.

Those splits meant that British officials in Brussels, and in London, became terrified of honest briefing of the media. From the days of Maastricht onwards, they had to be ruthlessly “on message” to keep their jobs.

The Tories were split over Maastricht, and then disaster of sterling falling out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism greatly reinforced the Eurosceptic ranks. Labour was split over euro membership, another cause of the bitter personal rivalry between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The British media were obsessed by the splits, not by what was happening in the EU (as it became).

Part of the problem was lack of knowledge, as well as lack of interest. A BBC independent panel summoned in 2004 to investigate allegations of institutional pro-European bias concluded that the bigger problem was a failure to explain how Europe worked, and why that mattered, rather than a bias in reporting.

Take the Single Market – largely a British initiative thanks to Lord Cockfield and his team. It is far more integrated than a free trade area, and much more than a customs union. Yet most of the current confusion in the Brexit debate stems from a constant confusion between those three different trade relationships. There’s also a constant failure to understand the treaty basis of the EU: it is a legal system, not a political fudge. But Theresa May’s Chequers compromise is trying to fudge it. As for the Irish border, that can’t be fudged: it has to be solved in a treaty – the Withdrawal Treaty. That is why it is so difficult.

Let me finish by looking to the future. How can we put EU-UK relations on a healthy basis post-Brexit?

Well, for a start, as far as the media is concerned, by not carrying on making the same mistakes. We have to understand each other better: we Brits must try to understand the motives, priorities and perceptions of our European neighbours. And we need to understand how the EU institutions work.

We need to stop using language like “traitors”, “ambushes” and “bullying”. That only poisons the atmosphere. The EU is not a zero sum game. Compromises are about finding mutually beneficial compromises.

We need to stop hoping or believing that Brexit will simply be the first step towards a steady disintegration of the EU. No one else wants to leave. The Poles don’t, the Hungarians don’t, and certainly the Irish don’t.

We need to stress our common interests: in security at home and abroad, in taming Trump and restoring decent transatlantic relations, in managing migration, and in containing China and Russia. We must try to preserve the hugely important European co-operation that has boosted science and research at UK universities.

The problem is that the vote for Brexit was an anti-EU vote: it was anti-free movement, which has left EU citizens in the UK feeling unloved and unwanted. It has poisoned the atmosphere, and the aggressive UK approach to the negotiations has simply made matters worse.

I fear there is a danger of an angry backlash in the UK for the next 10 years or more, as the harsh economic, social and psychological effects of Brexit become apparent, and the rest of the EU is blamed for not softening the consequences of our own decision.

Last of all, I would make two pleas. First, we must learn to speak foreign languages again. Expecting everyone to speak English undermines our own understanding of our neighbours. And finally, I still believe that we can and should Stop Brexit before it is too late.

Thank you.