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Euro sceptic, but sane

August 2004 | 101 » [Reviews](#) » [Euro sceptic, but sane](#) [Buy Issue](#)**Here is a sane Euro sceptic argument that tries to prove its case - and uses my work to do so. But it misinterprets its source material****Andrew Moravcsik**

According to the widely accepted "new historiography" of the EU - found in the work of Hugo Young, Alan Milward and others - British policy towards the EU has long been poisoned by ideology. Nationalistic opposition to practical schemes for economic co-operation - the customs union in 1957, agricultural policy in the 1960s, monetary co-operation from the 1970s, and environmental and social co-operation from the 1980s - meant that British prime ministers were forever "missing the bus." From Anthony Eden to Tony Blair, they engaged in a self-defeating series of defensive manoeuvres, simultaneously seeking to block further integration and promote specific British interests.

According to the Daily Telegraph columnist Christopher Booker, and Richard North, a former researcher at the European parliament, this is bunk. The problem was not that British leaders were slow and sceptical, but that they were gullible enough to go along with European integration at all. In their view, the EU's "central purpose... is not and never has been... to promote co-operation," and it provides no net economic benefits for Britain. Instead it is a deliberate, "slow-motion coup d'état" inspired by the ideas of Jean Monnet. It imposes an "agenda of subordination" to invasive centralised regulation - regulation pursued for its own sake, but particularly inimical to Britain. All along, the real pragmatists were those British leaders who proposed practical, workable intergovernmental proposals without weighty constitutional commitments. Booker and North are particularly hard on Tory prime ministers, whom they portray as either having secretly betrayed British interests (Edward Heath) or having been betrayed by their own officials into believing Europe was good for Britain (Margaret Thatcher).

To Booker and North's credit, and in contrast to the ravings of many Euro sceptics, they do seek to prove their case. Their weighty monograph contains a detailed history of European integration dating back to the 1920s, fine-print footnotes engaging the historiography of European integration, and some interesting new archival documents. Yet one is immediately sceptical of books peddling a "secret history" historians have missed, and sure enough, Booker and North advance their case only on the basis of severe historical and statistical distortion.

Years ago, Milward rightly derided the interpretation of the EU as an idealistic enterprise propelled by the ideas of Monnet and his friends as a "hagiography of the European saints." Booker and North sling epithets at the new historiography, but they evade or misunderstand the decisive facts upon which it is based. They misinterpret Monnet's own bitter opposition to the formation of the EEC (an organisation he begged Konrad Adenauer to kill) as a tactical feint, rather than as a principled preference for more interventionist atomic energy and transport schemes over the "apolitical" customs union.

The EU was constructed by national governments with a far more pragmatic agenda, as Booker and North's own evidence demonstrates. An entire chapter demonstrates that De Gaulle vetoed British membership in 1963 not for ideological reasons, but in order to gain concrete advantages for French farmers - something British leaders and their Whitehall officials consistently misunderstood. On this point, Booker and North rely almost entirely on my own scholarly work, which they prominently portray as the "real story" (as against Milward and Young's "pseudo-history"). Very flattering, except that Booker and North misconstrue what I wrote, which accords fully with the new EU historiography. It demonstrates that even a nationalist opponent of Monnet like De Gaulle co-opted European institutions to serve French economic interests. If, as Young and others argue (and Macmillan's advisers told him), Britain had not missed

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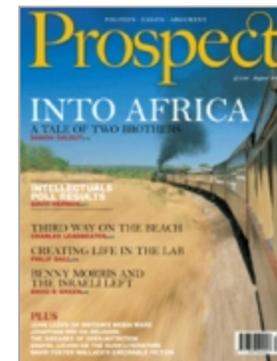
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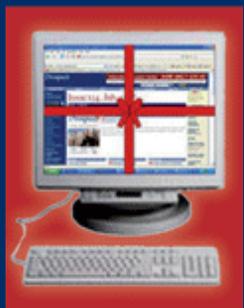
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the bus in 1956, it could have played the same cynical game. De Gaulle knew this, too, which is precisely why he blocked British entry.

More broadly, Booker and North never demonstrate that British "intergovernmentalism" - 1950s-style international co-operation without majority voting and legal supremacy - ever constituted a viable alternative. Even Nafta and the WTO no longer really function this way. No serious historian would contend that "Britain's postwar record in promoting European co-operation on an intergovernmental basis was second to none." Booker and North obfuscate Britain's implacable unwillingness to be involved in any customs union negotiations of 1955-57, while obscuring the fact that subsequent British free trade area proposals were deliberately designed by Eden and Macmillan as tools to defend Commonwealth preferences.

Booker and North's economics is even dodgier than their history. It seems implausible that a customs union that takes about 50 per cent of British exports provides no economic benefit. On closer inspection, such claims collapse. True, CBI polls find that a high percentage of British businesses do not benefit from European integration, but Booker and North neglect to add that those that do benefit tend to be much larger - comprising the bulk of British production. Yes, Britain in Europe campaigners exaggerated the unemployment predicted by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research if Britain were to withdraw from the EU. But Booker and North fail to mention the study's true conclusion: British GDP would decline by 2 per cent, inward foreign direct investment would be cut by a third and unemployment could be avoided only through large wage cuts.

The most engaging and original portion of the book is its extensive anecdotal evidence concerning the pernicious effects of EU and British regulation on small enterprises: Scottish fishing boats, slaughterhouses serving a single butcher, and the like. No doubt Britain has been disadvantaged by specific EU farm and fishing regulations imposed upon it as a condition for membership (the real debate concerns whether this could have been avoided by earlier engagement). And no doubt regulation, whatever its intent, benefits large companies with the economies of scale to comply cost-effectively, while driving smaller ones out of business. Ultimately, however, too many small and inefficient producers stifle a modern economy. The health of the British economy rests with expanding sectors of industrial and service providers, who benefit more from foreign investment and larger markets.

In the end, then, Booker and North are thrust back on the classic Euroseptic dogma - not xenophobic nationalism, but the complaint that the EU is an "undemocratic" scheme of centralised regulation. Yet their own story undermines this loose libertarianism. In nearly all their regulatory horror stories the villains are not Brussels bureaucrats - too few in number to exercise much direct control over national policies anyway - but well-meaning British officials exercising their own discretion. And why not? A democracy in which governments placate angry fishermen and abandon regulation designed to prevent the collapse of fish stocks, as recently occurred in the US and Canada, is no democracy at all. In the end, the public interest in economic growth and regulatory protection should trump special interests. The fate of small producers at the hands of the EU may be a tragedy, as Booker and North argue. But like any real tragedy, it is not just inevitable, but desirable. **P**

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