

EU-bashing and red herrings in the UK

By **Patricia Kelly**

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That the UK is not a member of the eurozone is at least partly down to the influence of Australian-American global media magnate Rupert Murdoch who is against British participation in the euro. Among the many print media titles owned by Murdoch's News Corporation are the Times, the Sunday Times, News of the World and the Sun; plus Sky Television and parts of ITV, both rivals to the state-owned BBC.

Murdoch's tabloid Sun newspaper – renowned for its bare-breasted lovelies on page 3 – claims to have been read by 22.2 million people in the UK last month, a figure that includes mobile and internet users of its content. There are those who believe that the Sun's support can swing an election. Hard for them not to believe, therefore, that one of the reasons Prime Minister Gordon Brown called off a snap autumn election is because Rupert Murdoch does not want to go to the country just yet.

Murdoch wants a referendum on the EU reform treaty which the Sun – “Europe. Never have so few decided so much for so many” – has dubbed the constitution. The newspaper says that 100,000 readers have voted for a referendum. Winston Churchill and patriotism are evoked in the same breath as the call for a referendum, implying that the EU is an enemy that must be defeated. A petition calling for a referendum has also been launched by the Daily Telegraph, a broadsheet owned by twin brothers David and Frederick Barclay, self-made businessmen who earned a fortune in property and retail before buying into newspapers. The majority of Telegraph readers are supporters of the Conservative Party (hence its nickname, The Torygraph) although when the Barclays bought the Telegraph in 2004 David suggested that it might in future no longer be the “house newspaper of the Conservatives”. He is also reported to have said: “Where the government are right we will support them.” No sign of this, however, amid headlines such as ‘Brown is dishonest over EU vote’ and ‘EU treaty could spell end of overtime’. The Telegraph claims in excess of 100,000 reader votes in favour of its demand “that the government stand by their manifesto commitment to hold a national referendum on the EU reform treaty”.

Putting the case against a referendum in a recent article in the liberal, left-leaning Guardian, columnist Polly Toynbee professes alarm at, but says she does not really believe, rumours of a government wobble. “The government is now in for a perfect press storm” writes Toynbee. “The dysfunctional dominance of four newspaper groups, with four fanatical Europe-hating owners, will try to force a referendum.”

The Daily Mail, which sells most newspapers after the Sun, claims to be the voice of middle England and is most definitely right wing. Dubbed by detractors as the ‘Daily Hate’, it is anti-EU and anti-immigration. It goes in for celebrity baiting in a big way, with lots of close up shots of celebrity cellulite. A recent reader comment posted online demanded that Tony Blair and Brown be tried for treason for denying the British public a referendum.

Millions of voters, says the Daily Express, have “had a

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bellyful of the European Union". Owner Richard Desmond used to own several pornographic magazines as well as the celebrity magazine OK! and still owns the TV stations, The Fantasy Channel and Red Hot TV. The front page of his newspaper carries proportionally more stories about the late Princess Diana or the missing toddler Madeleine McCann than the other British tabloids. The Express masthead displays the curious boast that it is "The World's Greatest Newspaper" – which it probably was for a short time several proprietors ago half-way through the last century, until it went tabloid and circulation went into decline. Gordon Brown's red lines, according to the Express, are "red herrings".

Patricia Kelly is a freelance journalist based in Brussels.

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