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## WHY THE UK GOVERNMENT FAILED TO TACKLE THE EUROMYTHS

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Boris Johnson claimed that the UK should "have our cake and eat it" during the UK 2016 referendum.

Johnson, a rotund, larger than life character, has form with food and myth-making.

As Brussels correspondent for the Daily Telegraph he infamously claimed the EC was about to ban prawn cocktail-flavoured crisps.

Johnson misconstrued the facts. Drafting a directive on food flavourings and sweeteners, the European Commission had asked national governments for their input.

Unfortunately, British negotiators had failed to add prawn-cocktail flavoured crisps to the list.

Food – be it curvy cucumbers, bendy bananas, sausages, biscuits, custard creams, chocolate, Caerphilly cheese or yoghurt - features prominently in the many hundreds of euro scare stories the commission and others have tried to debunk over the years.

Emanating primarily from The Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph and Daily Express, most of these colourful and in many instances amusing jibes have proved only partially true, and a sizeable number outright false.

Yet these stories spread far and wide and have almost certainly had a significant impact on public opinion over the years, not just in the UK but across the continent and further afield.

And they have not relented, forming part of the average Briton's daily diet during the Brexit referendum and subsequent negotiations.

Even with the full support apparatus of government, stamping out 'fake news' is notoriously hard – and has only got trickier since the advent of the internet and social media.

Despite this, Brussels, national governments and other players have proved reluctant to intervene in any meaningful sense. Why?

Euromyths, both silly and political, have been circulating since the UK joined the EEC in 1973.

But by the early 1990s, with political and monetary union looming into view, the problem had become particularly acute, notably in the UK.

The commission, UK foreign office and a number of MEPs had long been attempting to debunk the

most obviously untrue stories. However, their response was typically ad hoc, partial and reactive.

Unsurprisingly, their efforts were largely in vain.

### **'Euromyth' as lucrative British export**

A small team was tasked by the commission to stem the tide, focusing on the UK, from where so many myths were emanating.

Ironically, the euromyth was fast becoming a viable and lucrative British single market export.

Based in London, I was a member of the commission's team, and the position gave me a ring-side seat onto this rather unedifying corner of European politics.

It became clear the reasons for this cautious approach to intervene was partly political, and partly operational.

The UK government's hesitance could be put down to the fact that John Major's Conservative government [1990-97] was weak and preoccupied with numerous parliamentary rebellions. It was also wary of instinctively anti-EC media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch.

### **Brussels doesn't answer back**

And then Brussels was a convenient scapegoat which was unlikely to answer back, at least in public.

The commission could not afford to be seen to be interfering in UK politics, especially in a highly-politically charged environment such as Maastricht.

Nor could it take issue with the source of several myths: namely, Whitehall's tendency to gold-plate Euro legislation, which was and remains a British prerogative.

Compounding matters, few British journalists had much understanding of how Brussels worked or of European law, and many had little interest in finding out about either.

Operationally, teams at the commission, the FCO and elsewhere were too small and rebuttal systems, protocols and procedures were inadequately defined.

Media accuracy and fairness was not top of mind for policy experts, who were sometimes caught flat-footed by the blare of unwelcome publicity and could prove defensive.

We aimed to respond within 24 hours, but it often took days to marshal the facts, let alone gain legal approval. And then persuading the offending journalist or publication to print a rebuttal or clarification was by no means guaranteed.

Unlike in many other countries, there was (and remains) no right to reply in the UK media.

Some newspapers printed the commission's responses, but many did not.

The cards were stacked against us. We had some success, but only a concerted, sustained and

properly-funded campaign explaining the benefits of EC/EU membership while refuting the myths and misconceptions could be effective.

Critically, this needed the close cooperation of supra-, national- and civil society actors at all levels.

The UK government and its fellow member states should have orchestrated and led such a campaign.

This leadership was not forthcoming, certainly in the UK. Like Johnson, Westminster has long been content to have its euro cake and eat it.

With protectionism, unilateralism and xenophobia back on the rise and fake news abundant, the failure to debunk euro-mythology should be a cautionary tale for national governments and multilateral organisations across the world.

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