

## **Hippoglossus Hippoglossus and Chips, Twice Please Love?**

### **Adventures in the Underbelly of Euromyths**

The British are proud to have given the world the English language. After the painful shedding of an empire, English, a global lingua franca, is all that Great Britain has left to remind its people of its former status as a world superpower. Imagine, then, the horror experienced a few years ago by more than three million readers of the *Sun* (Britain's biggest-selling daily tabloid newspaper) as they read of a so-called "chip shop plot" so dastardly in its linguistic (indeed *culinary*) implications, that it could only have been conceived by a profoundly disturbed and dangerous mind:

Chippies [i.e. fish and chip shops] could be forced to sell fish by their ancient Latin names – thanks to the craziest European ruling so far. If barmy Brussels bureaucrats get their way, baffled Brits will have to ask for hippoglossus hippoglossus instead of plain halibut. ... Takeaways, restaurants, fishmongers and supermarkets are all set to be BANNED from using names that have been around for centuries. (*Sun*, 5 September 2001: 3)

Being forced to speak Latin is no joke (as thousands of scarred British grammar school survivors can testify). Not only is it linguistically complex (how *do* you pronounce "hippoglossus"?), it is also a reminder of a time when a foreign occupying power (think Romanesque soldiers sporting swarthy continental complexions) forced Latin verses on Britannia's plucky inhabitants without so much as a Italian-English dictionary to compensate for the loss of sovereignty). Leaving aside the Latin influences that resonate through modern English (since that only hinders my point)

one can scarcely imagine a more sacrilegious assault on the British psyche than to attack the English language – and through the sacred domain of the “chippie” no less!

This unprovoked attack on a core symbol of Britishness (think of it as the bureaucratic equivalent of a group of illegal immigrants beating up a Chelsea pensioner) appears not to be an isolated incident, however. Poke beneath the surface of European involvement in British *affaires des coeurs* (note to reader: see how easily foreign influences can creep into the English language!) and one discovers a panoply of apparent intrusions in the “British way of life”. Consider the following:

- EU to outlaw Britain’s unique double-decker buses (*The Times*, 9 April 1998, supplement: 3)
- Britain no longer appears on EU maps (*Sun*, 15 April 1999: 2)
- Standardised Euro-condoms that ignore the “large requirements” of the virile British male (*Independent on Sunday*, 12 March 2000: 25)
- UK fireman’s poles to be outlawed (*Daily Mail*, 16 June 2002, p. 25)
- British farmers forced to give toys to pigs and pat them for at least ten minutes to stop them from getting bored (*The Times*, 29 January 2003: 1)
- Homemade cake makers such as Britain’s Women’s Institute forced to list their ingredients (*Daily Express*, 9 July 2004: 9)
- Brussels ban barmaids from baring too much cleavage (*Sun*, 4 August 2005: 5)
- EU rules GM food can be labelled as ‘organic’ (*Daily Mail*, 5 January 2006: 3)

These examples, taken from UK newspaper reports of EU policy proposals, hint at the array of Brussels-based bureaucratic (always referred to in UK newspaper discourse

as ‘Eurocratic’) assaults on our green and pleasant land. What unites these and similar newspaper reports of policy pronouncements from Brussels (the administrative home of the EU and symbol *par excellence* of European vindictiveness towards Britain) are that they contain hardly a shred of truth. They are in fact “Euomyths”.

Euomyths are lies and distortions perpetrated by journalists concerning EU-related issues, and dressed up as “facts”. As can be seen in the list above, Euomyths are not the exclusive fare of tabloids, concerned only with trivia, gossip and “non-news”. Here, the traditional view of the “serious” press, informing readers on important ‘public affairs’ with its measured and rational discourse, is thrown into question. “In a manner that highlights how the tabloid press in Britain often sets the journalistic pace that the broadsheets follow, the latter too, revel in the pleasure of mobilising Euomythology according to their own particular criteria and partisan interests.”<sup>1</sup>

The origin of Euomyths lies in harmonisation policies (now ended) which were intended to make the Single Market in Europe viable. But they attracted the ire of UK newspapers determined to protect the “British way of life” (whatever that means). While not a uniquely British newspaper phenomenon (the Greeks apparently have a similar problem), they appear with such regularity in the UK press that the London headquarters of the EU last year introduced a “rapid rebuttal service” that identifies and counters inaccurate and misleading EU-related news reports (see: [www.cec.org.uk/press/myths/index.htm](http://www.cec.org.uk/press/myths/index.htm)). The site (“Get Your Facts Straight”) employs “information workers” to update everyday examples of Euomyths alongside an accompanying rebuttal – but this suggests they are fighting a losing battle.

This is because Euromyths are beloved by British journalists (90 per cent of Euromyths appearing on the European Commission's web site originate in the British press) for at least three reasons. Firstly, they offer deliverance from the journalists' day-to-day problem of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story (no doubt encouraged by the no-lose situation in which no right of reply exists that might discourage newspaper editors from printing blatant lies and untruths about the EU). Secondly, journalists delight in good clean fun to entertain and titillate readers (for example, what could be more fun than barmaid's cleavages – jokes about “banning jugs” were perhaps inevitable). Thirdly, Euromyths are ideological shorthand for imagining how European “Others” are destroying our “thousand year old island heritage”. In this sense Euromyths constitute a banal form of xenophobia that is often not recognised as such precisely because of its dressage as journalistic “fact”.

EU attempts to counter Euromyths is a lost cause, however. This is not only because the number of Euromyths appearing in the British press have reached national epidemic proportions (and are beginning to circulate internationally – for example, the pigs and toys story was reproduced in German and Czech Republic newspapers). It is also because Euromyths are an outcome of lost understanding about Britain's role and place in the world. The loss of Britain's pre-eminent status as the last great European empire has resulted in Britain's newspapers reporting *affaires de Europe* with detachment, as through a telescope (though a looking glass is perhaps more apt): “as reminders of British hopelessness, challenges to British ingenuity, as irritating stimulants of a repetitive fin-de-siècle obsessiveness with ‘British-could-be best’”.<sup>2</sup>

This has resulted in Britain's special contribution to Europe being one of our *detachment* from it. The result is a complex and precise cultural relationship with that continent where our particular set of telescopes enable us to put Europeans "in their place" based on the following template: "Let them meddling Eurocrats try to implement their ludicrous red-tape legislation here, they'll get a bloody nose!" (At this juncture, those who imagine Euromyths are of no serious political consequence might like to bear in mind the extent to which the UK tabloid press set the agenda on EU-related issues; whether Britain eventually rejects or accepts the Euro as its currency may well come down to the "drip-drip" effect of daily xenophobia manifest in Euromyth-type news stories.<sup>3</sup>)

Not far below the surface of the Euromyth, then, is a symbolic hate-figure: the EU official. Let us call him (they tend to have a gendered appearance) by his newspaper *nom de plume*: the Barmy Brussels Bureaucrat (hereafter BBB). Here, the *Sun's* infamous 1991 two-fingered gesture to the then EU Commission President Jacques Delors (replete with its headline "Up Yours Delors!" 8 June 1991: 1) constitutes a classic journalistic defence of British sovereignty against incursions by the unelected BBB. That Delors is French only added to the pleasure of inviting the paper's readers to make their own two-fingered salute to Delors. (It published a selection of two-fingered reader photographs the following day including one taken on the symbolic quintessence of the British homeland: the white cliffs of Dover.)

The BBB is the ghost at the feast of every Euromyth. Politicians from EU countries come and go (how the British press love to see them go!) but the BBB remains an *idée fixe* (just how many more of these foreign language-infractions can my English-

heart take?) at the centre of UK newspaper coverage of the EU affairs (especially when it concerns stories of EU fraud and corruption). They are, in fact, common newspaper currency traded by journalists mindful that they are writing for a generally “Eurosceptic” UK readership (incidentally, one that they have shaped and nurtured). In this context, journalists have little or no inclination to challenge their readership’s opinion (nor their own for that matter) about any aspect of European life.

The newspaper image of the BBB is anchored in a nightmare world of Orwellian bureaucracy gone mad. They appear as the quintessence of pasty-faced, besuited, Big Brother officialdom; a subterranean cabal producing half-baked policies to stave off boredom and justify their own highly paid existence (why else would BBB’s require EU fishing vessels to carry a minimum of 200 condoms? – see *Daily Mail*, 8 August 1999: 18). But can we emerge from under the symbolic weight of the Euromyth Mountain to understand not only the real world of BBB’s, but also the murky world of media spin and lobby group interests in which Euromythology is produced?

Perhaps we can. In January 2002 a spate of stories appeared in the UK press that briefly cast light on how Euromyths are manufactured and for what sort of purpose. The story in question concerned how BBB’s were intent on discovering whether commercially produced cooking sauces are actually vegetables in disguise (yes, you read that sentence correctly!). It appeared to confirm our worst fears about Brussels and EU intrusion replete with images of BBB’s passing sauce through metal sieves with an aperture of five millimetres! Such a heaven sent storyline – one actually based on fact, unusual for a Euromyth-type story -- picked up the ludicrous/trivial nature of

such enquiry and mobilised inevitable headlines (e.g. *The Times*' "Brussels can like it or lump it", 8 January 2002: 8). The story is far from heaven sent, however.

Close inspection by the *Guardian* (11 January 2002: 4) revealed the source of the story (no pun intended!) to be a well known sauce manufacturer that had retained a commercial lobby group with a remit to find a way around EU rules governing sauce thickness (current EU rules apparently mean that the lumpier the sauce, the higher the import/export vegetable tariff sauce manufacturers must pay). EU officials had also recently deferred a decision as to whether to raise the lump threshold from 20 per cent to 30 per cent as a sop to sauce manufacturers who apparently want to produce "textually interesting" -- hence lumpier -- sauces to meet changing consumer demands. Sauce producers would, therefore, be hit by EU rules governing high vegetable tariffs. In short, profit margins were at stake.

With its lucrative consultancy fee pending the lobby company hit on the Euromyth angle as a way of embarrassing the EU into dropping lumpy sauce testing. They cast the "ludicrous Eurocrat" angle and journalists took the bait. The EU was apparently dismayed and angered by the "inaccuracy" of the story, not least because it undermined the work of the customs committee responsible for implementing vegetable size/quality across the EU (a necessary job given the number of fifteen member states: then fifteen, now twenty three). However, a senior EU spokesman put his own particular spin on the issue by pointing up one minor journalistic error in *The Times*' coverage as evidence that UK news reports were entirely fabricated.

At the heart of this brief but murky tale of Euro-mythology is the politics (and profits) of spin in which the line between truth and half-truth is blurred. What is lost from view is how powerful commercial interests of lobby groups and their clients coincide with journalistic impulse to titillate rather than ‘inform’ readers. Writing in the *Guardian*, a rare journalistic acknowledgment of this mutually beneficial arrangement was offered by Andrew Osborn: “... the perfectly legal yet stealthy way in which multinationals fight their lobbying battles through the press leaves a rather sour taste, even if corporate interests do happen to coincide with media ones’ (*Guardian*, 11 January 2002: 4).

Herein lies the rub. Euromyths are the tip of an iceberg of commercially produced spin (remember that journalists, too, work in commercially-minded environments) such that the effect is a dilution of public knowledge and understanding about what EU officialdom does on behalf of the people of Europe. BBB’s do serve on obscure committees, and make powerful decisions that do not sit easily with national and cultural differences, but the contribution they make to the organisational life of Europe – how they actually oil the wheels of EU institutions – remain consistently hidden from view.

Exploring the dark underbelly of Euromyths reminds us how easily images (in this case, stereotypes of EU officialdom) can be mobilised for spurious commercial and/or political interests. And it reminds us how too many journalists are complicit in serving corporate rather than public interests.

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**Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Cross, S. and Golding, P. (1996) United Kingdom: Europe through the looking glass, *The European Union in the Media 1996*, Madrid, Fundesco/AEJ Annual Report

<sup>2</sup> Smith, A. (1995) United Kingdom: “Bent and twisted journalism” – The British press of the 1990s, *The European Union in the Media 1995*, Madrid, Fundesco/AEJ Annual Report

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, P.J. and Weymouth, A. (1999) *Insulting the Public? The British Press and the European Union*, Harlow, Addison Wesley Longman.

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