

EU in or out – Have your say on 23rd June



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Despite its imperfections, the EU's economic, social and environmental benefits to the UK in general and Scotland and the Highlands and Islands in particular, far outweigh its costs. More than that, the need for a unified EU with member states co-operating in support of progressive values remains as relevant as ever.

IN 1988 I HAD A SUMMER JOB with a Harris road contractor, part of which involved the highly-technical work of raking stones from the verges of the newly double-tracked road in Balallan in Lewis while the regular workforce was on well-earned holiday.

I probably wouldn't have been there at all, giving a passable impression of a one-man chain gang to the motorists speeding by, but for the EU's European Regional Development Fund that helped finance that and countless other infrastructure projects in the Highlands and Islands over the last 30 years.

Listen to the arguments presented by the Brexit campaign as we head towards next Thursday's crucial EU referendum vote and you'd be forgiven for thinking that the UK is shackled to a chain gang too. An economic and political one stretching all the way to the EU's institutions in Brussels from which it's essential for the UK to escape.

But what exactly is it that Brexit campaigners want to escape from? Maybe it's the regional policy that provides targeted assistance to improve competitiveness and increase employment in the EU's most economically and socially disadvantaged regions through a combination of infrastructure investments, business support, education and skills development. Travel virtually anywhere in the Highlands and Islands and you'll see examples of that assistance, delivered with the help of the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund, for an economy literally on the edge of Europe.

Or perhaps it's the EU's support for rural development that Brexiters don't like. The Common Agricultural Policy is certainly not without its faults. Nevertheless, it provides vital

support for farmers, crofters and other rural businesses and communities via the Scottish Rural Development Programme's various schemes, including the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme, Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme, and LEADER amongst others. Does anyone seriously want to reduce these vital funding taps to a trickle, given the economic and social challenges that continue to confront our rural communities?

Brexiters' campaign to drive us into less-than-splendid isolation might even be motivated by a desire to wave goodbye to the European single market. In the parallel economic universe they inhabit, it may be considered a smart move to exclude oneself from a market that gets rid of trade tariffs and guarantees free movement of people, capital, goods and services within it. A single market that is vital to the EU's, and by extension the UK's, economic prosperity in terms of jobs and growth.

Then there are the environmental and health benefits of EU environmental laws, passed over several decades, that have improved air and water quality, helped safeguard biodiversity and reduced waste. That's an important and evolving track record of collective legislative action to address issues that transcend national boundaries and impact upon us all. Similarly the EU provides a strong legal basis for protecting employees' rights including limiting working hours, tackling workplace discrimination, making working conditions safer and ensuring employees receive compensation for work injuries.

CALL ME CYNICAL IF YOU WILL, but I'm finding it hard to believe that Brexit's foremost cheerleaders, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Nigel Farage, are all progressives who just want what's best for the UK as a whole. All that

bombastic rhetoric about taking back democratic control from Brussels, and the UK making its own way in the world, rings rather hollow when practical considerations intrude.

Take, for example, Brexiters' bizarre 'Etch a Sketch' approach to trade agreements. They seem to believe that new ones can be drawn up almost immediately after the UK's existing agreements, developed within the EU, have been wiped out. All the while ignoring President Obama's warnings that the UK would be at the back of the queue when it came to negotiating new agreements in isolation with the United States.

Similarly, the German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, has poured cold water on Brexiters' optimistic contention that the UK could retain access to the single market from outside the EU. Not so, according to the Herr Schäuble. The UK would have to be either in or out, with no middle ground in between. Consider the havoc likely to ensue to the UK economy while we tried to deal with the repercussions of what would in effect be a self-made mess.

Having failed to develop a coherent economic argument for leaving, the Brexit campaign has redoubled its focus on immigration, claiming that exiting the EU will enable the UK to more effectively control the number of immigrants entering the country. Even if the more rabidly xenophobic scaremongering about immigration emanating from Brexit's supporters in the right-wing press is put to one side, there is not much coherence to be found in this argument either. That's because most of the immigration into the UK comes from outwith the EU. So leaving will make less of a difference to the net annual immigration figure than Brexiters' like to make out. It just suits the 'Little Englander' tendencies and career aspirations of some politicians to exaggerate that impact.

All of that aside, there's no getting away from the fact that the stakes resting on the outcome of Thursday's vote are extraordinarily high. If the UK does decide to leave, it's not impossible to envisage a domino effect leading to the fragmentation of the EU at exactly the time that we should be pooling our collective resources for the greater good in terms of peace, security and economic stability.

Neither is it impossible to imagine a future Conservative Government at Westminster rolling back the EU's progressive environmental and social legislation under the ideological guise of prudent economic management in a time of austerity. Then there's the potentially seismic question of what Brexit might mean for the future of the UK as a whole.

Of course this situation could have been entirely avoided if David Cameron had held his nerve rather than pandering to the right wing of the Conservative Party by offering a referendum in the first place. But then, the Conservative Party has a habit of consuming itself over the issue of Europe, as Margaret Thatcher found to her cost when unceremoniously ousted as Prime Minister in 1990.

Still, we are where we are. Despite its imperfections, the EU's economic, social and environmental benefits to the UK in general and Scotland and the Highlands and Islands in particular, far outweigh its costs. More than that, the need for a unified EU with member states co-operating in support of progressive values remains as relevant as ever.

In an increasingly complex, interlinked and globalised world we must work together for the common good rather than turning away from our neighbours in search of narrow political advantage. That's why I'll be voting to remain in the EU on 23rd June.

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June 23rd — Independence Day, Mark Two

In 1975 the Western Isles and Shetland were the only areas of Britain to clearly vote No to the EU. Come 23rd June I hope that the people of the Highlands and Islands will continue that proud radical tradition and not be browbeaten by fear and prejudice into supporting the Establishment status quo.

I am a pro-European who is opposed to the European Union. Why?

1) I want to be free — this is by far the most important argument. The late, great Tony Benn argued that if you cannot vote out those who make your laws then you do not live in a democracy.

The SNP cannot explain why they want Scotland to be free from Westminster rule but subject to Brussels rule. The slogan, repeated ad nauseam by their MPs and MSPs (who of course cannot say anything else because they have signed an agreement not to go against party policy on anything), is 'an independent country in an interdependent Europe'. They don't seem to grasp the inconsistency of asking that Scotland should become a nation independent of Westminster whilst at the same time arguing that it should be a nation dependent on Brussels.

I know the argument that we would have our voice and say, but that voice would be tiny — one commissioner in 29 and a handful of MSPs in the European Parliament. We have a far larger influence in the UK parliament than we would ever have in the EU.

Furthermore, by any standard, the EU is much less democratic than the UK parliament. The notion that a people should determine its own policies is surely one that is core to basic democracy. Scotland's fishermen, farmers and industrial workers should be governed by Scotland's politicians, not those of either the

EU or the UK. It is a strange kind of postmodern 'independence' when you are not free to make your own laws or your own trading agreements.

As a nationalist sympathiser I am appalled that the SNP seems to have given up on the idea of independence. By campaigning with Osborne and Cameron they will ensure that, if Remain win, the whole question of Scottish independence is put on the back burner for another couple of decades. It's a phenomenal price to pay in order to support an EU that is opposed to Scottish independence anyway.

2) I want economic justice. Despite the desperate attempts of Gordon Brown and other Labour 'remainers', the fact is that the EU is an economic union for the benefit of the 'haves' and not the 'have nots'.

It is quite evident that the Establishment in most countries are mostly keen on the EU, whereas many of the people — especially the poor — are not. This is because the EU has become a club of the corporations, in hand with government establishments ensuring that, whilst there are banks 'too big to fail', manufacturing industries like steel are left to go to ruin.

The fact that self-styled progressive parties like the SNP, Labour, the Greens and the Liberals who are supposed to be on the side of the poor are standing side by side with Osborne and Cameron — together with their friends in the city and the big American corporations desperate to get a TTIP deal — is something that should be challenged, not celebrated. The EU is a politician's and bureaucrat's dream and a democrat's nightmare. We have been bought and sold for Brussels gold.

And let's not forget the importance of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership proposed deal. President Obama came over here to interfere in our referendum because he is desperate to have it as part of

his legacy. It is fundamentally a deal which hands over power from elected governments to undemocratic corporations.

Ah, but don't we need trade agreements? Well of course they are helpful. But what most people don't seem to know is that we don't have a trade agreement with the US, and we never have, and yet somehow we manage to trade with them. Furthermore if we were an independent country we might get some proper trade agreements (rather than the corporate deals favoured by the Americans) somewhat quicker than if we stayed in the EU who have for seven years been trying to get a deal with India but seem to be stuck at the moment on the question of Italian tomatoes!

In all the confusion about figures one basic fact stands out — we pay £13 billion into the EU treasury each year and get £4.5 billion back (that is with our rebate — without it we would be paying £18 billion). Those who are worried about the fact that their subsidies and grants might be lost should realise that there is no necessity for that to happen. Indeed we would have more money to spend.

Of course there are risks in leaving, but what seldom seems to be mentioned is that there are as many if not greater risks in staying. The Italian banks have a 360 million Euro black hole, the Greek economy is still devastated and Spain and Portugal are not much better. The EU is a declining market — from 36 per cent of the world's GDP in 1973 (when we joined) to 17 per cent now. Why should we tie ourselves to the EU in this way? Why can't we more less Eurocentric and more internationalist?

3) I want more immigrants in Scotland — Scotland should be in charge of its own immigration. This is not said from any anti-immigrant xenophobia but precisely for the opposite reason. We need more immigrants in Scotland, not fewer. But we need to

control our own borders and not have them controlled by an unelected EU Commission.

The recent case of the Australian family in Dingwall facing deportation indicates the kind of nonsense that an overcrowded England is now forcing to be applied in Scotland as well. We want a Scotland where people are welcome from all over the world, not one where only those inside Fortress Europe get privileged access.

4) I want peace. One of the good arguments for Remain is the argument that the EU has brought us peace — although it could just as easily be argued that the EU is the result of a peace brought about by war weariness and NATO.

But with the rise of the extreme right in Greece, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden, the EU is no guarantor of peace. Indeed, our disastrous intervention in Ukraine and non-intervention in the Balkans indicates some of the dangers of seeking to create a European super-state.

5) I want power to be returned to the people. The Establishment think we are stupid. They warn us about World War Three, economic collapse and the return of the plague in their hope that Project Fear will work again. I have yet to hear an argument from a pro-EU group that is not funded by the EU.

Finally a vote to stay in the EU is not a vote to Remain. The EU will not stay as it is. In 1975 we were voting for a Common Market — a trading agreement — yet it is now far beyond that. The Treaty of Lisbon brought in foreign policy and military arrangements. If we vote to 'remain' we are giving carte blanche to an EU superstate.

Scotland will be voting on 23rd June to become a sub-region of a region within a European superstate, or we can vote for freedom.



DAVID ROBERTSON

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