

Encouragements and challenges from the latest social attitudes survey

On Thursday 26th March, the 32nd *British Social Attitudes* survey was published. After the recent YouGov poll giving supporters of continuing EU membership a 10% lead, this survey, which took a larger sample size of 3,000 voters as opposed to less than half that number in the YouGov survey, provided some welcome encouragement for supporters of withdrawal but also some serious challenges.

There is no question that the EU is unpopular with the British electorate. However, the *Telegraph's* headline "British more anti-EU than last two decades" only tells part of the story. Given a referendum now, more than half of those surveyed (57%) would choose to remain in the EU, while only 35% want to withdraw. This only confirms the findings of the YouGov Survey that the withdrawalist movement has a lot of ground to catch up. However, when the renegotiation option is brought into the equation, 24% of those surveyed indicated an unequivocal wish to leave the EU with 38% wanting to stay in a reformed EU where Brussels would exercise considerably less power. There is indeed, in a sense, a Eurosceptic majority but herein lies the challenge. How many of those 38% could be won over to an outright withdrawalist position if they could be convinced that Cameron's renegotiation is only going to be mere window dressing which does not address their concerns?

The answer to this question depends on identifying why so many people who are clearly uncomfortable with our EU membership do not wish to pull the plug altogether. This, of course, means asking them some questions. Not wishing to presume to anticipate what replies we might be given, there are a few obvious areas worthy of investigation.

1. How aware is the electorate of the alternatives? Hugo van Randwyck and Robert Oulds both claim that when voters are given the choice between EU membership and re-joining EFTA (i.e., adopting a purely trade-based relationship with the EU) the balance comes down strongly in favour of EFTA.
2. How well-informed are most voters concerning the degree to which the EU interferes in our lives? Or the cost?
3. How many of those reluctant to support withdrawal have been misled by such nonsense as the "Three Million Jobs" myth and believe that we would sink without trace if we withdrew?
4. How many are still unaware that the objective of the EU always was, is and always will be the creation of a federal United States of Europe?

It is the conviction of all the CIB Committee that if the UK electorate was presented with a clear picture of the aims and costs of the EU and the positive options for our country as an independent nation that the vote for withdrawal would be overwhelming. Furthermore, even though we and most of our supporters are firmly committed to the preservation of the UK, we nonetheless take heart from Scotland.

When David Cameron announced that a referendum on independence was to be held, supporters of the Union appeared to have an unshakeable majority. A poll by Lord Ashcroft in May 2013, less than 18 months before the vote took place, claimed that only 26% of those surveyed supported independence with a massive 65% against. However, the Independence campaign came within a whisker of pulling it off and barely six months after the referendum, it is all too apparent that the vote to stay in last September did not settle the issue. "Half of Scots think we will be independent by 2025" claimed *The Scotsman* earlier this month and research from the University of Edinburgh suggests that about half English voters agree with them.

A similar momentum in favour of withdrawal from the UK is therefore a distinct possibility. The challenge is to build a team and devise the right strategy to make this happen.

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