

EU debate disappointment at TPA's post-election conference

The Taxpayers' Alliance, in conjunction with Conservative Home, Business for Britain and the Institute for Economic Affairs, held a post-election conference in London on 11th May. The four-hour event covered a number of topics, including Scotland, the election campaign itself and the prospects for change in the EU. Although three of the four organisations co-hosting the event would claim to be cross-party, the meeting had a very strongly Tory flavour to it, with most of the keynote speakers being Conservative Party members.

Dr. Liam Fox was one of those who addressed the conference and his speech sounded a distinctly EU-critical note. He was particularly concerned about further possible calamities within the Eurozone, calling the Single Currency "an economic pass-the-parcel; a time bomb which they all hope will go off when someone else is holding it." He claimed that senior figures in Brussels live in a parallel universe, quoting Mario Monti, a former Commissioner and Prime Minister of Italy who said recently "We have done so well with the Euro". Dr. Fox appeared somewhat sceptical about the prospects of any meaningful renegotiation, especially in the light of recent comments by José Manuel Barroso, a former President of the European Commission, who stated that he would support renegotiation "as long as it is compatible with the objectives of the European Union." Given that the main objective of the EU is "ever-closer union" and the logical end-point of "ever-closer union" is "union", this does not sound promising for Mr Cameron, said Dr. Fox.

The panel for the debate on reform in the EU consisted of Douglas Carswell, UKIP's sole MP, Matthew Elliott of Business

for Britain and Laura Sandys, the former MP for Thanet South and Chairperson of the European Movement. For someone such as myself who had attended CIB's rally and the recent presentation on "Flexcit" by Dr Richard North, the level of debate appeared pretty puerile by comparison. Admittedly, with a time slot of only half an hour including questions from the floor, there was not going to be long enough to do this subject justice, but it was particularly frustrating that neither of the other panellists took Laura Sandys to task for repeating Cameron's statement that we had to stay in the EU to be "at the top table". This shows a sad ignorance of how the EU now works. So much regulation landed on us by the EU does not originate in Brussels at all. The EU merely acts as a conduit for various organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, UNECE (the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) and other global bodies. These are the real "top tables" and we do not have our own seat here. The EU represents us, but not just us. It represents all 28 member states. We would have far more clout in influencing legislation as an independent country, especially given that these bodies are not so keen to see national vetoes surrendered as the EU. (Your scribe attempted to raise this subject when the debate was opened to questions from the floor, but there was insufficient time for all those who raised their hands to be given a chance to speak)

Douglas Carswell stated his belief that David Cameron would try and repeat Harold Wilson's trick of 1975, trying to sell a piffling concession to the electorate as a major triumph of renegotiation. With that one would agree. His endorsement for Business for Britain and its importance in the forthcoming referendum is a different matter.

Matthew Elliott said that remaining in under renegotiated conditions was better than the status quo. However, his contribution was most disappointing. He clearly shows no understanding of the EEA/EFTA option which would satisfy the

concerns of businesses he claims to speak for while opening the door to a much better future. It would be by far the best way of satisfying on the one hand, a desire for a looser trading relationship with the EU while on the other ensuring a seamless exit. One was left with grave doubts as to whether he really does want to see our country regain his liberty.

However, given Laura Sandys' senior role within the European Movement, it is apparent that fear, uncertainty and doubt are the only real weapons available to those who support our membership. She said that the pro-EU movement had failed to make the case for the positive role played by the EU. To which one must reply that it is because it hasn't actually played a positive role; it has done far more harm than good. Supporters of our EU membership really don't have any convincing arguments. Their arguments are very weak and easily refuted. Unfortunately, although right is on our side, we have a long way to go to win the argument irrevocably. Withdrawalists are still not at all clear what to do with the aces in our hand which, if played correctly, should finally persuade the public how much better life will be on the outside. I therefore left the meeting with a mixture of hope and frustration.