

# The futility of renegotiation

What we were fobbed off with 39 years ago? Harold Wilson pledge to renegotiate Britain's membership of the EEC when he won the second of two general elections held in 1974. A deal was secured at the Head of Government meeting in Dublin on 11th March 1975 which, in Wilson's words, "substantially though not completely achieved" the renegotiation objectives.

We were allowed to exempt foods from VAT, to strike a better deal with imports from the Commonwealth while securing a reduction in our contribution to the EU budget. We "also maintained our freedom to pursue our own policies on taxation and on industry, and to develop Scotland and Wales and the Regions where unemployment is high" according to the leaflet sent out by the Government. No earth-shattering concessions here; after all, we are still some way from a common EU taxation policy 39 years later, but with the "in" campaign far better funded than the "out" and considerable ignorance on the part of the electorate as to the true nature of the EU project, these changes were sufficient to secure a 2 to 1 majority in favour of staying in,

No one can expect that a few cosmetic tweaks to our relationship with the EU will secure a two-thirds majority to remain within the EU in 2017. Far more of us are now aware of what the EU is about and we don't like it. Given the choice between remaining in the EU on present terms and withdrawing, an opinion poll carried out by *Opinium* or the Observer newspaper last month suggests that 48% of voters would choose to leave while only 37% would wish to remain. However, poll after poll indicates that the balance would swing in favour of continued membership if we could renegotiate our relationship. However, these polls rarely, if ever, go into detail as to exactly what should be renegotiated.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that any renegotiations

involving a significant return of powers to our parliament are not going to happen. Jean-Claude Juncker, the incoming Commission President, made it clear in a speech to the European Parliament that any hopes of ending the free movement of people would be doomed to failure. In January 2014, a group of 94 Conservative MPs signed a letter stating that national parliaments should to be given the power unilaterally to veto EU regulations that are felt to be unhelpful. William Hague, Foreign Secretary at the time, said that such hopes were “unrealistic”. This point was underscored recently by Manfred Weber, the new leader of the centre-right EPP faction in the European Parliament, who said that, “For us this, is non-negotiable. We cannot sell Europe’s soul... If we grant each national parliament a veto right, Europe would come to a virtual standstill.”

When it comes to Justice and Home Affairs, there is little sign that a future Conservative government is even going to try to repatriate powers. While some Conservative MPs are arguing for UK withdrawal from the European Convention of Human Rights, this is a smokescreen. The ECHR is not linked to the EU but to the Council of Europe. Furthermore, if the EU becomes a signatory to the ECHR in its own right, the member states – including, of course the UK – will de facto have to abide by it. What is far more worrying is the opting back in to 33 measures enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, including the European Arrest Warrant. Theresa May is quite happy to allow UK citizens to be extradited to countries with a far less robust system of justice than the UK and is considering further measures including signing us up to a Europe-wide DNA database.

On top of all this, the confrontation between David Cameron and other EU leaders over Juncker’s appointment has severely diluted the very limited reserves of goodwill left towards our country in Brussels. While there have been some conciliatory remarks by other perceived “reformers” like Sweden’s Prime

Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, it would require the support of a majority of Heads of State to allow a special relationship for the UK within the EU and the recent leaked tapes of conversations between senior ministerial figures in the Polish government illustrate just how hard it will be to secure such a majority. Then there is the European Parliament, where the main centre-right and socialist groups have closed ranks to ensure their Eurosceptic colleagues are kept at bay. The arch-federalist Martin Schulz has been reappointed President of the European Parliament, a man who is no friend of this country and whose past form suggests he will prove a formidable obstacle to any serious return of sovereignty to the UK.

Following his debates with UKIP's leader Nigel Farage in which he came off second best, Nick Clegg admitted that he had been foolish to say that in ten years' time, the EU would be "about the same" but for once, he was telling the truth. There will be no substantive renegotiation. The long march to ever-closer unity will carry on regardless. Wolfgang Schäuble, the German Finance minister claimed that we in the UK "don't actually want that much. {we} want some flexibility" but his definition of "not that much" or indeed David Cameron's may prove rather wide of the aspirations of the UK electorate. Ultimately, we have only two choices – staying on board shouting from the sidelines as the doom-laden EU edges ever closer to the rocks or leaving the fools to their folly.