

Mood Music

To win the referendum for the UK to leave the EU, we will need to battle on a number of different fronts. Some of the crucial issues have been frequently mentioned on this website – the need for a credible exit strategy, the need to ensure our sums are correct and, of course, how to handle the thorny issue of immigration, which can be a bit of a two-edged sword.

One other important but much more “fuzzy” battlefront issue must also be addressed if we are to win – mood music. It is not sufficient merely to offer a series of facts explaining how much better off we would be as a free country; we need to make withdrawal feel good. This all sounds very wishy-washy, but basically, it’s all about soundbytes. Our opponents are past masters of this. When I took part at a debate at Southampton University back in September, one of my abiding recollections was that my principal opponent, Peter Wilding of British Influence, didn’t attempt to rebut my criticisms of the EU but instead made it appear a much safer option to remain.

Our Chairman, Edward Spalton, has also noted the power of mood music. Edward has participated for several years in the CIVITAS programme of information about the EU, speaking to sixth forms in debate with representatives of the European Movement. He used to win every time, usually convincingly. However, around two years ago he had the salutary experience of losing a debate with an MEP who advanced very little of substance except to say “The EU is like a family. Like your own family it’s not perfect but you would be very lonely without it”.

During the recent Council of Ministers meeting, many leading political figures on both sides of the channel have been canvassed for their opinions about Britain leaving the EU and their comments are far more laced with mood music than

substantive arguments.

John Major, for instance, claimed that leaving the EU was “dangerous”. That’s very emotive word. What exactly does he mean? What increased dangers will we face? Invaders from Mars? A plague of locusts? He then went on to say that leaving the EU would leave us in “splendid isolation”. Again, a very fuzzy term. From what exactly would we be isolated? We would still be members of the UN, Nato, the Commonwealth, UEFA and countless other international bodies; our airports and seaports wouldn’t suddenly close if we left the EU, our international telephone and railway links would still continue to operate and Dover would still only be 21 miles from Calais. Or does he really mean that withdrawal would usher into power some Kim Jong-Un-like ruler who would close down all contact with the outside world?

Glenis Willmott, a Labour MEP, told the meeting of the European Parliament that she found it “hard to believe” the UK’s “position as a global leader” was “under threat”, adding that she hoped “sanity prevails”. Well cheer up, Mrs Willmott. Regaining our places on the world’s top tables, we will be far more of a global leader than in our present situation, shackled to the EU. As for sanity being the exclusive preserve of the “remain” camp, the very fact that Nick Clegg is included in their number is surely enough to dispel that particular argument!

Frivolity apart, these examples show the potential power of soundbytes. We may dissect them and point out that there is no substance behind them, but we nonetheless have to master these tools and fight back – in other words, to use the soundbyte as well as the detailed economic study and the exit strategy document to counter our opponents. If the remain camp uses fear as a weapon, we must emphasise hope and opportunity. Personally speaking, I find the prospect of withdrawal incredibly exciting. It will be the greatest day in our country’s history since VE and VJ Days, both of which took

place over a decade before I was born. People threw street parties to celebrate. Even though I am not much of a party animal, I fully intend that my village will have a party to celebrate independence even if it may fall on my inexperienced shoulders to organise it. But how can I encapsulate that excitement in a few pithy phrases? With the number of meetings and debates about the EU likely to increase during 2016, we will all need to develop our skills when it comes to mood music. We have a much better narrative than our opponents, but style as much as content and passion will determine how persuasively we come across to our audiences.