

Reflections on my spell in the lions' den

Over the years, I have undertaken quite a few speaking engagements, including addressing several political meetings. Last Thursday, however, was the first time I had spoken in a debate about the European Union. CIB was invited to send a speaker to represent the “leave” side by the Southampton University Debating Society and I ended up being the person thrown into the lion’s den.

Why do I say this? Because I knew right from the start I would be addressing a meeting where the vast majority of the audience would disagree with me about withdrawal. The student generation in general is predominantly pro-EU and the members of Southampton University Debating Society are overwhelmingly so – even more than I had anticipated. The usual straw poll taken at the start of the debate indicated that only a tiny minority of those in attendance supported withdrawal. Still, at least this meant that I was aware from the outset what I was up against.

The debate followed the usual format of two speakers for and two speakers against the motion. One speaker from either side was a student. I had Jonathan, a law student, as my fellow-supporter of independence and he acquitted himself well. The guest speaker for the opposition was Peter Wilding of British Influence. All four of us were given seven minutes to put across our respective points of view – quite a challenge. It seemed like barely had I begun to build up a head of steam before the chairman’s gavel warned me that I only had one minute left!

The initial presentations were followed by a lively question and answer session after which all four speakers were given three minutes to sum up. The outcome? I’d love to say that the

“leave” side carried the day so convincingly that we had to restrain the newly-awakened audience from lynching the speakers who supported EU membership, but unfortunately, that is the stuff of pipe dreams. The pro-EU cause still carried the day overwhelmingly, but Jonathan and I had managed to shift opinion slightly in our favour, so I left with at least some crumbs of comfort.

I also left with plenty to mull over and I hope that my reflections on the evening’s events may be of help to anyone else finding themselves in a similar position. Countless debates and discussions are likely to be held on this subject over the next two years and if any of us find ourselves asked to take part, it is advisable to be as prepared as possible.

My first thought concerns the speakers put forward by the opposition. Pro-EU groups are well-funded and thus able to field experienced speakers used to the cut and thrust of debate. These people will look to exploit any mistakes made by our side, to seek to control the terms of the debate and even if they cannot refute some of the more damaging accusations made about the EU, they are very good at creating suitable “mood music” – playing to the emotions of the audience.

My most glaring mistake was to claim that Winston Churchill never back-tracked from his famous comment that “Each time Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, we shall always choose the open sea.” Apparently, in 1961 Churchill wrote a letter to his Constituency Chairman stating that “I think that the Government are right to apply to join the European Economic Community.” (And this claim is supported by at least one article on the internet.) Oh well, we live and learn. At least Churchill was sufficiently cautious about the project to ensure we stayed out in those formative years, but I’ll be a lot more careful if I mention his name again. Still, I did have one chance to get my own back. Mr Wilding mentioned that the Norwegian Foreign Minister had strongly urged us not to go for the same relationship as his country enjoyed with

the EU. Although he didn't mention the famous "fax diplomacy" phrase, it was sufficient for me to be able to explain that the Norwegian government still wants to join the EU, even if most Norwegian voters don't. I was able to say that other Norwegian politicians like Anne Tvinnereim paint a very different picture and that the reason Norwegian government ministers do not want to let us know how good their relationship is with Brussels is because if we take this on board and vote to leave, it will scupper their hopes of membership for ever. Touché!

In future, I will also do my best to avoid using the word "back" – for instance as in "we can go back to being a sovereign, independent country." Mr Wilding was pretty merciless when I used this phrase. "He's looking to the past, not the future" – or words to that effect. Thankfully, again in my closing summary, I was able to qualify my statement along the lines of "If you know you are heading down a blind alley, you have to go back first before you can truly move forward," but I wouldn't recommend using "back", "revert", "return" or similar. The opposition is well-trained to latch onto anything which will enable them to score points. It's not good to let them put us on the defensive.

Another observation is that trade, jobs and exit routes hardly featured in the question and answer session. I had anticipated this and had not said much about them in my opening presentation except to mention that there was an escape strategy which would preserve our trade with the EU and our jobs too. I had also come prepared to talk about the refugee issue, which I had expected to feature prominently, but it hardly got a mention. I did try to frame the debate in terms of building a new kind of politics – of my sympathy for people who voted for Jeremy Corbyn because they were fed up with managerial, top-down politicians, pointing out that the EU project was designed by – and is still run by – exactly these sort of people who are so contemptuous of the electorate and

democracy in general. I also made sure that issues like associate membership and the location of the real top tables were given a mention. I reckon that with a more level playing field – in other words, if the audience had consisted of 100 assorted people from my village or the nearest town rather than 100 students – I would have given Mr Wilding a good run for his money and could have won the debate. Nonetheless, even though I know I would be most unlikely to carry the floor, I would be quite happy to debate the issue with students again.

The fact that the audience swayed slightly away from supporting the EU is very interesting and encouraging. This is how an unstoppable momentum for withdrawal will be achieved – little by little, a few at a time. External events may work in our favour, but for example, one must not place much, if any, importance on media reports that the migration crisis is shifting public opinion towards withdrawal. We must hope, both for the sake of these unfortunate people themselves as well as for the countries of Europe, that this will be a non-issue well before the referendum takes place. Rather, we must present a well-argued, balanced argument for the political advantages of independence and make clear our enthusiasm for it. After all, would we be working so hard to secure a “leave” vote if we didn’t believe life will be a lot better as a sovereign state?

One further thought which crossed my mind is that to speak to a lecture room full of students who are engaged with political issues is only to reach a tiny number of people. Debates enable us to reach some individuals but only a small minority. The “little by little” approach is a battle that must be fought on several fronts – debates, leaflets, the internet, social media, letters to newspapers and indeed, casual conversations with friends and acquaintances. Winning people over also requires repeated exposure to our arguments. I would love to know how many people who voted to stay in at the start at the meeting and voted the same way at the end were perhaps

just a little less convinced of their position at the end of the debate, having heard what was (I hope) a passionate and well-argued case for independence for perhaps the first time. You can't expect to change many strongly-held opinions in the space of just one brief exposure to an alternative position. To prove the point, eighteen months or so ago, I was distinctly unconvinced by arguments that the EEA/EFTA route was the only viable escape strategy from the EU. I am very grateful to Robert Oulds of the Bruges Group for clarifying my thinking here, but it took extensive perusal of both his writings and those of Dr. Richard North over a period of several months to change my mind on this subject. "Soft" supporters of EU membership and the undecided can likewise be won over to support withdrawal, but it won't happen overnight. It will require persistence on our part.

My final word to anyone else contemplating the cut and thrust of debating our EU membership is simply this:- enjoy it! We may be dealing with the most important political decision our country will face in our lifetime and we all feel passionately about the subject, but let's make the most of the experience. Mr. Wilding thanked me at the end for a lively debate and in spite of our profound differences on this key issue, yes, we would both agree that it was a good, fascinating, well-fought battle. I did enjoy it, even though I didn't carry many of the audience with me and, somewhat wiser from my trip to the lions' den, I'm looking forward to the next time.