

# **“Stronger Together”: highlights of CIB’s annual rally, 11 April 2015**

The Campaign for an Independent Britain held a public rally at the Emmanuel Centre in Westminster, London on Saturday March 11th.

The rally featured speakers from a number of affiliated eurosceptic groups – highly appropriate given the title of the meeting was “Stronger together, looking forward. Bringing the Eurorealist groups together”. The meeting was chaired by CIB’s chairman Petrina Holdsworth and both George West, CIB’s President and our Hon. Secretary Edward Spalton, gave addresses. The other speakers came from organisations affiliated to CIB – John Mills from the Labour Euro Safeguards Campaign, Simon Richards from The Freedom Association and Robert Oulds from the Bruges Group.

The prospect of a referendum if David Cameron is returned to power in next month’s General Election dominated the meeting and has unquestionably been a factor in encouraging eurosceptic groups to recognise the need to work more closely together. The speakers agreed that a referendum before 2017 looked to be highly improbable, but it was pointed out that Cameron has selected the second half of that year deliberately to coincide with the UK presidency of the EU. Although a Conservative victory is by no means a foregone conclusion, it is most likely that Cameron’s team have agreed on the choreography with the main players (such as Germany’s Chancellor Merkel) that will enable him to claim a significant concession that will pull the wool over the electorate’s eyes. In other words, he is seeking to repeat Harold Wilson’s trick in 1975, where nothing of any significance was really agreed.

All the speakers acknowledged that we start as the underdogs, although underdogs have a long history of pulling off surprising victories. Simon Richards suggested that several different campaigns to suit different sections of the electorate may be one way forward. John Mills mentioned his involvement with Business for Britain and the importance of winning support from the business community. He mentioned the slogan used by the “out” campaign of 1975, in which he played a prominent role: -“Out of Europe, into the world”. Given the gradual re-orientation of our trade away from the EU in recent years, this ought to have resonance forty years later.

Robert Oulds emphasised the need to be able to sell an exit model that will not cause job losses. He explained the reasons for his support for the EEA/EFTA model as used by Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. He also explained why the “Swiss”, “Turkish” and “WTO” options would not be feasible as an immediate exit route, although he also stressed that while EEA/EFTA would be the only route to a seamless exit, it is not an ideal long-term relationship between an independent UK and the EU. He emphasised the volatility of public opinion. Euroscepticism tends to increase in times of economic downturns.

However, the cause is not lost. Bruges Group surveys indicate that when the voters are offered a choice between the EU and EFTA – in other words, between a political Europe and a trading relationship – the result is overwhelmingly in favour of EFTA. He stated that both Richard North and Hugo van Randwyck have met with senior officials from EFTA, who indicated that the UK would be very welcome to re-join. We must be positive, said Mr Oulds – emphasising joining something rather than leaving something.

A series of videos of the day’s proceedings will be posted to the website in the next couple of weeks. However, as a post script, Edward Spalton mentioned that, in the 1975 referendum, his father voted to stay in because although he felt

distrustful about the whole Common Market business, "If that man Tony Benn is against it, there must be something good about it!"

Given that Tony Blair has come out so strongly in favour of us staying in, could history repeat itself and a thoroughly mistrusted politician once again act as a recruiting sergeant for the side he opposes? We can but hope.