

# A subject that is too important to be left to the experts

*The standard of debate about our membership of the European Union leaves much to be desired – even from the business community, argues Peter Troy.*

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Last week the national head of the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC), John Longworth, reportedly said the best way to end political uncertainty over the UK's relations with the European Union (EU) is to hold an early referendum, ie before 2017.

The call was quickly endorsed by others which encouraged front page headlines in one national newspaper and many articles in which business organisations commented on the vexed In/Out issues of the EU debate; with quotes from both the CBI and also the 200,000 member organisation The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB).

For those of us who have been debating the EU membership issue for decades we know too well there are many powerful reasons why an early referendum is not possible. Not least, there must be a Referendum Bill passed through Parliament and any attempt to rush it through would doubtless meet with stiff opposition from both sides of the EU divide. Politicians could build all sorts of delays into the Parliamentary timetable and stop an early contest. Also a very salient reason is Mr Cameron's need to conclude plausible negotiations with 'Brussels'. Any pressure to push for an early 'reform' risks one or more member states blocking his moves, whatever they be. Indeed, senior officials at number 10 insist up to two years will be

needed to secure a successful 'renegotiation' with the other EU countries. Whether any sort of meaningful renegotiation is possible or credible has to be seriously doubted.

What is not in doubt – as last week's reporting illustrated – is the lack of quality discussion and knowledge on the whole subject of the European Union by the UK media and the over simplified, as well I argue at times the non-representative comments of business pressure groups. Quotes from both the CBI and the 200,000 member strong organisation The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) were much reported last week in the national media.

Whilst the CBI favours EU membership on behalf of its corporate members, understandable because the EU is pro big business, the FSB have a stance which is curious. The FSB represent the small, but large in numbers, business community.

Twice in their history FSB branch delegates have vote for a policy to leave the EU at their annual conferences. In 2001 as an FSB activist I, along with a colleague from the North East, proposed a motion calling for the Federation to demand withdrawal from the EU which was supported by the representatives of the branches by a majority of 68 percent.

Later in 2004 the Federation's conference voted out the EU Constitution treaty proposal (which in all but minor detail became the Lisbon Treaty) as undesirable, by a huge majority of 95 per cent. Despite these clear expressions from its membership, which have not been contradicted, the FSB is apparently supportive of EU membership. Despite my best efforts in 2014 the FSB Policy Team remain oblivious to the viable option of continued Single European Market (EEA) membership without the constraints imposed by the political EU; this is known as The Norway Option.

To bring matters up-to-date a report was published last Friday by the independent educational think tank Civitas titled *The*

*Norwegian Way*. This is a detailed study of how the UK, like Norway, could continue to trade tariff free with the Single Market while regaining the UK's political independence from the EU.

This latest learned work supports the theory first advocated in detail by The Bruges Group in 2013. There are I suggest lessons to be learnt and knowledge to be gained from Norway's part of a wider economic group, the European Economic Area, which permits it free trade with EU countries but allows it to avoid the Common Agricultural Policy, control its own fisheries, and pay a much smaller membership fee. Unlike EU members, Norway can negotiate its own free trade agreements with countries around the world, with its own priorities.

On the ongoing question of the UK's continued membership of the EU and – depending on the outcome of the general election on 7th May – there is a need between now and the EU referendum for people to become better informed. It is a too important subject to be left to politicians, journalists and lobbying groups. As with so many matters the detail can be found on the internet.

By Peter Troy