

The uniqueness of the breadth of anti-EU sentiment in the UK

Next Wednesday, Parliament will be dissolved in preparation for June's General election. The final Prime Minister's Question Time has already taken place and it provided an opportunity for retiring MPs to make their voice heard in the debating chamber for the last time.

Quite a number of MPs have already indicated that they will not be seeking re-election. Some, like Alan Johnson, who headed up the thankfully ineffective Labour in for Britain campaign last year, will be no great loss. His colleague Gisela Stuart is a different matter, however. One of the few solidly pro-leave Labour MPs, Mrs Stuart's eyes were opened when she was appointed as one of the UK Parliamentary Representatives to the European Convention, which was tasked with drawing up a new constitution for the European Union.

Another veteran pro-leave MP to be stepping down is Sir Gerald Howarth, the Member for Aldershot since 1997, with whom I shared a platform last May at a debate held in nearby Farnham.

These two individuals, from different parties but united in their opposition to our membership of the EU, epitomise the uniqueness of anti-EU sentiment in the UK and ultimately, why we were able to secure a sufficient majority to leave.

Historically, in most member states, anti-EU sentiment has been primarily a phenomenon of either neo-fascists or the political left. Jacques Delors' "Social Europe" of the 1980s won round most Socialist parties to supporting the EU, including our own Labour Party. Sections of the Far Left remained irreconcilable and as Delors' vision has faded with the EU gradually turning into a honeypot for lobbyists from

multinational businesses, they have further reason for their opposition. In this country, even though left-of-centre anti-EU sentiment in the UK has never been as strong as it was in the 1970s and early 1980s, it never died out completely.

What marks out the UK as unique, however, is the strength of Thatcherite anti-EU sentiment. The centre-right Christian Democrat-type parties in the other member states are solid supporters of federalism. David Cameron's pledge to pull the Conservative Party's MEPs out of the European People's Party grouping in the European Parliament, which includes Angela Merkel's CDU and France's "Les Republicains", when seeking to become Conservative leader, was one of the reasons for his success. It was probably no great issue for the ideology-light Cameron, but many of his MPs were aghast at their colleagues in Brussels being bedfellows of unreconstructed federalists.

The Campaign for an Independent Britain has always sought to act as an umbrella group for anti-EU organisations on both the left and right of the political spectrum and by and large, we have found that the vast majority of pro-withdrawalists have been willing to work together, notwithstanding their differences over other issues.

Indeed, this held true during the referendum campaign itself. Some left-of-centre Brexit campaigners felt that Martin Durkin's Brexit the Movie presented a vision of an independent UK which was too free market and Thatcherite for their taste and produced their own Lexit video to offer a more socialist picture of life after the EU. This did not preclude left- and right-leaning withdrawalists sharing of platforms, nor did differences in other matters obscure the considerable degree of overlap. Ultimately, the undemocratic nature of the EU and its progressive erosion of our national sovereignty is not an issue which is the exclusive concern of any one part of the political spectrum.

This is because the scale of revulsion over the EU's intrusion

into the political process in our nation is born out of something which transcends party politics – our long-standing tradition of freedom and our mature democracy. This is without parallel in most other EU member states. Only the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries can begin to compare with us in this area.

And thankfully, this deep-seated loathing of foreign interference in our affairs was sufficient to bind an otherwise disparate group of MPs and activists together and secure the magnificent result of 23rd June. To all those departing pro-leave MPs who are bowing out:- Ladies and Gentlemen, enjoy your retirement and thank you for your efforts. We owe you a great debt.