

Voting for the status quo is not an option

We are very aware that opinion polls are consistently showing that supporters of outright withdrawal are in a minority. Of course opinion polls can be wrong, with both the UK general election in May and Greece's bailout referendum earlier this month producing results somewhat at odds with the pollsters' predictions. Having moved to my present home in East Sussex less than four months ago, I am still at the stage of meeting local people for the first time and being asked what I do for a job. When I mention my work for CIB, in the great majority of cases, the reaction has been along the lines of, "I think we should leave the EU too; good on you!" or similar. This in and of itself by no means proves that the pollsters are wrong, however. Rural East Sussex cannot be taken as representative of the UK as a whole and even if supporters of withdrawal really are more numerous than they appear in surveys, there is no room for complacency.

Having said this, however, there is good reason to believe that quite a lot of support for "in" is actually quite soft. The more detailed analyses of UK public opinion which go beyond the simple in/out question find very little support for closer integration. A poll by Ipsos Mori back in October of last year showed that while support for remaining in the EU stood at 61% excluding "don't knows", only 14% supported closer economic and political union. Even though support for staying in the EU has increased still further since then, there are still only a small minority of people who want to see further powers surrendered to Brussels.

So, to put it another way, potential support for voting to leave could be as high as 86% if it were made clear that there is no status quo on offer. It is either closer political integration or withdrawal. The dream of ever closer union is

still alive and kicking on the Continent, as François Hollande, the French President, made clear over the weekend. "What threatens us is the lack of Europe, not the excess of it," he said in a speech at an event to celebrate the 90th birthday of Jacques Delors. He went on to talk of accelerating the process of integration within the Eurozone – a common budget for the single currency areas and a separate parliament too – or at least, separate sessions of the European Parliament exclusively for the MEPs whose nations use the Euro. Of course, this is only one man's opinion – and one man who is very likely to be booted out of office in the next French presidential election, but it was sufficient to elicit a response from Magdalena Andersson, Sweden's finance minister, who felt concerned that Sweden (and by implication, the other EU member states who still use their national currencies) could be relegated to second class members of the EU.

But is there any alternative? The concept of a "two-speed Europe" has been touted for some years and for all the competing visions of how to move forward and the lack of enthusiasm for closer integration among the populations of some Eurozone states, including France for that matter, there are enough politicians within the governments of the Eurozone countries itching to press on with the primary agenda of the EU – the creation of a federal superstate. They are not prepared to wait for Sweden to decide whether or not it ever wants to adopt the Euro and they do not wish the UK to slow down the process either.

What looks likely is that some form of "associate membership" may be offered to the UK. What it would involve is not totally clear, but it will inevitably be a far inferior relationship to the EU than the EEA/EFTA option. It could well be designed in such a way as to inculcate a sense of inferiority among the non-Euro members in the hope that it will encourage them to join the "vanguard". It could be far closer to "government by

fax" than the former Norwegian premier Jens Stoltenberg's infamous parody of his country's relationship with the EU.

To put it another way, "associate membership" would be rather like travelling down a slow, bumpy country lane in a clapped out old banger while the "vanguard" cruise along the autobahns in their sports cars. The duration and quality of the journey on the two roads are very different, but neither route allows you to spend long in lay-bys. You have to keep moving towards the destination whether you travel slowly or quickly (although there will be a few side-roads allowing quick access onto the autobahn from the narrow road) and more importantly, whether you switch to the fast road or continue bumping along the farm track in your banger, THE DESTINATION OF BOTH ROADS IS THE SAME. In other words, an opt-out from ever-closer union is utterly meaningless.

This is the key point – joining the EU means joining a project that has only ever had one goal. Economics comes second to the political objective of creating the United States of Europe and this is where the withdrawalist campaign can, with a good campaign, whittle away at the "soft" supporters of continuing UK membership. I have yet to see the results of any poll asking these people why they want to vote to stay in, but it would be a pretty reasonable assumption that, for many of them, the answer would most likely be, "to keep my job", "because we need to trade with the rest of the EU", "I'm nervous about a step into the unknown", "I've been offered an Erasmus scholarship" or "I want to continue living by the Mediterranean and I'm worried I would be forced to return to cold, grey England if we left the EU." In other words, their big concerns revolve around issues which are peripheral to the aim of the EU. Convince them that there is an "out" option that will address their concerns while at the same time allowing the country to escape from a political project which few believe in and support for staying in the EU will peel away. Or course, we must also convince voters that the idea of

keeping the level of EU interference at its current level is a non-starter. It's either more EU or goodbye EU. Those supposedly hard-won derogations are only humps in the road. They slow your progress but they don't force you to stop, let alone turn back.

The EEA/EFTA option fits the bill precisely. It also has the advantage of being practical rather than aspirational. Not only have "aspirational" books and leaflets made unrealistic claims (for instance, "Leave the EU and we can control immigration", or "Leave the EU and we can slash regulation") but your aspirations – in other words, your picture of what you would like an Independent UK to look like 10 years after we leave, whether or not it is achievable – may be very different from mine. Withdrawalists are united on regaining our sovereignty and in opposing the unaccountability of the EU structure. This in itself is sufficient to provide plenty of "sunlit uplands" and avoids focussing on issues which only divide supporters of withdrawal.

There is, however, one potential pitfall. Plans for closer Eurozone integration and the alternative of "associate membership" may be developed in such a way as to replace the EEA altogether. Richard North flagged this possibility up on his blog last month. Within the EEA agreement, there is provision under Article 127 for members to withdraw on 12 months' notice. In other words, if all 28 EU countries simultaneously gave notice to quit, there would no longer be an EEA. Whether there is some sort of cunning plan being hatched in Brussels to force Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein into the EU by pulling the EEA rug from under their feet we cannot say as the discussions are being held behind closed doors. However, in the same article, Dr North shows that there is a way of maintaining a "shadow EEA" arrangement if this is indeed the EU's plan which will avoid being forced into associate membership. With Iceland's government distinctly unenthusiastic about EU membership and Norway boasting a

strong and well-organised anti-EU movement, any attempt to shoehorn these countries into the EU through sheer naked coercion will be fiercely resisted and the shadow EEA idea will no doubt be widely canvassed.

All this is still speculation at the moment, but a quick move to a two-speed Europe with the UK of necessity in the slow lane must surely cause many of those who favour a status quo to realise that it isn't going to be an option. A vote to stay in means more integration, however much David Cameron's sham renegotiations will leave us lagging behind the federalist front-runners in the Eurozone.