

## **“WINNING THE REFERENDUM 1975 AND 2002: THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT?”**

Speech to the Citizens for Europe Conference, Kingston University

10<sup>th</sup> November 2001

Ernest Wistrich, whose contribution to Britain's membership of the European Union has been shamefully under-recognised, has asked me to draw lessons from the 1975 Referendum which might be helpful in the next referendum. For reasons of convenience, I am going to assume that the Referendum on British Membership of the Euro is held in the autumn of 2002.

In 1974 I was the third person recruited into Britain in Europe. I served as assistant to Sir Con O'Neill and acted as Secretary to the Referendum Steering Group. From April to June 1975 I acted as Director of the Youth Campaign. I broadly concur with Ernest's chapter "Lessons of the 1975 Referendum" to be found in 'The Euro Debate' recently published by the Federal Trust. Ernest's article however does not quite do justice to the cultural tension between the European Movement and Britain in Europe. The European Movement was sandwiches and Central Europeans, pamphlets and federalism. Britain in Europe was power talk and press breakfasts in Mayfair, Oxford Union jokes and cabinet level spin. No doubt such tensions will re-occur in 2002, but it is my view that both racehorse and workhorse are necessary!

Organisational details aside, one can identify three areas where the two referendums are likely to be similar and three areas where they will be very different. I am not of course claiming that these are the only points of importance.

It is apparent from recent General Elections that the English only vote in what they regard as serious political events. While the Scots and Welsh and Ulstermen may have got used to referenda, the English will regard their second nation wide referendum as a serious matter. As I believe it is impossible to maintain any campaign on the details of the Euro for more than two weeks, I have no doubt that the real subject will be Britain's continued membership of the European Union. Whatever the starting point, the subject therefore will be the same as in 1975 – "should we stay in?"

In 1975 the Britain in Europe campaign had the huge advantages of arguing for a "yes" and for the status quo. Logically of course Britain's entry into the Euro is a change to the status quo. However it is not as much of a change as it would have been had the referendum taken place before 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002. It was always going to be impossible to persuade the English to answer a hypothetical question. "Should Britain join a European Single Currency when it exists" is the kind of question that they snort at in Surrey and ignore in Ipswich. By the autumn of next year most of the British will have had direct personal experience and physical contact with the notes and coins. More importantly they will be able to see for themselves that France is still France, that the Greeks can manage the Euro and that, contrary to Euro-sceptic propaganda, the Germans are not single-handedly running the show. As the referendum campaign proceeds it will become clearer and clearer that the yes campaigners are arguing for the status quo. Their case will be the maintenance of our membership of the European Union, albeit a Europe much wider and deeper than the one which we endorsed by two to one in June 1975.

So the referendum will be a serious event, it will be about the status quo and like 1975 it will be set against a background of security concerns. It is easy at this distance to forget that the 1975 referendum campaign took place at a time of radical insecurity, similar to the period we are now passing through. The oil shock, the miners' strike, the three day week and a 'who governs Britain election' were fresh in everybody's minds. While nobody took the details of Harold Wilson's re-negotiation seriously, they were aware that Europe was a more attractive destination in times of trouble. Osama bin Laden and the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> have created a visible external enemy for all of Europe, whose psychological importance we should not under-estimate when inviting the British public to ratify our continued membership. The original arguments for membership of the European Union based on the need to

create peace in a warring continent no longer motivate electors. The case for Europe now has to rest on the defence of Europe's interests in a dangerous world.

There are three areas of difference that it is worth considering carefully. The first is timing. As a result of Harold Wilson's manoeuvring the government had no freedom to choose the date of the 1975 referendum. This time Tony Blair has an absolute freedom to choose, subject of course to the well known five political tests. These tests are not regularly rehearsed as the five economic tests, but they are much more important. They are, in no particular order, as follows. Has the Prime Minister's reputation survived bin Laden and the Afghan war such that he is still able to walk on water by the time the referendum is called? Are No 10 and No 11 Downing Street still talking to each other? Are their offices still talking to each other? Is there a credible cabinet alternative to a Brown succession? Does Tony Blair have another job to go to, such as the Presidency of the European Commission in 2005?

There is another aspect to timing which relates to preparation. Britain in Europe was put together at very high speed in the autumn of 1974. Much of our early work at 149 Park Lane involved sweeping up rat droppings in a deserted office building, and finding furniture, let alone, staff. The structure was literally made up as we went along. The current Britain in Europe has the reverse problem. It has of necessity been called into existence before it could play any meaningful independent role. I am full of sympathy for the position in which the current personnel of Britain in Europe find themselves.

The second major difference from 1975 is in the role of the Government. Then the divisions were inside the governing party. Pro-European cabinet ministers really did arrive at 149 Park Lane in dark glasses. The air was full of a delicate ambivalence and a whiff of treachery. Courtesy of the convenient suicide of the Conservative Party, the Labour Government in 2002 has no excuse for not committing itself whole-heartedly to winning the referendum. In the last analysis, they can probably afford to lose the referendum and still win the subsequent General Election. They will presumably have a substantial majority of the House of Commons committed in advance. It is Governments which make news. There should make no pretence of neutrality. It is here that the credibility of the Government is important. Tony Blair has rightly taken advantage of the current extraordinary crisis to play on the great themes of public policy and to appeal to the electorate beyond the normal tedious day-to-day fare of domestic issues. Provided Afghanistan has not turned sour in the interim, the Prime Minister is well placed to set Europe in the context of such great themes. There could be no clearer distinction between this platform and the nuanced artificiality of Harold Wilson's appeal to the country.

Perhaps most importantly of all, we should remember the persistence of surprise. 2002 will be different. There will be issues that we have not anticipated which suddenly claim public attention. There will be new opportunities to be seized, as well as new traps to be avoided. In 1975 I was responsible for the Britain in Europe Food Committee. This was chaired by Jimmy Goldsmith in his early pro-European manifestation. He ruthlessly and brilliantly exploited a temporary movement in the world market for sugar to counter public fears about the impact of the CAP on British prices. In 2002 the press will not be as supportive as they were in 1975. The sceptics will be much better financed than their predecessors. Victory will go to the campaign which can best exploit the surprise issues that give their case relevance.

Serious, status quo, security, timing, government and surprise are all reflections of the underlying bedrock of the British debate about Europe. In 1975 the Youth Campaign and Students for a United Europe produced a series of humorous posters featuring a take off of the Britain in Europe bird with its Union Jack livery. My favourite poster featured a Union Jack ostrich with its head in the sand and the words "Sovereignty – the Whole of the Illusion or a Share in the Reality?" If Bill Clinton was running the yes campaign he would make sure that all our desks were decorated with slogan "It's the sovereignty, stupid".

