

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON

## A REFERENDUM ON OUR MEMBERSHIP

## OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

1. **How much support is there for having a referendum on our membership of the European Union?**

All the opinion polls show that there is overwhelming support for a referendum on our membership of the European Union. This is partly because there has been no opportunity for the electorate to express its views on our EU membership since 1975, despite numerous broken promises that this should be allowed to happen. It is also because, looking ahead, the UK needs to decide where its future lies. This is why among those who support our continued membership, as well as among those who are opposed to it, there is a strongly held opinion that the British people need to be given the chance to decide whether they want to remain members, making the best of the opportunities this presents, or to take the risks involved in leaving the EU. The strength of feeling has been amply demonstrated by the unofficial referenda run this year by People's Pledge. Both in Thurrock in Essex, on one hand, and in Hazel Grove and Cheadle, two constituencies close to Manchester, on the other, the results were overwhelming. With polls larger in percentage terms than those in recent local authority elections, almost 90% of all those who voted in all three cases made it clear that they wanted a referendum held.

2. **What are the choices likely to be?**

A referendum of our membership of the EU, if one is taken place, is likely to take one of two forms. One would be a referendum where there was a straight choice between our voting either to stay in the EU or to leave it. There is, however, a substantial chance that this is not the proposition which will be put to the electorate, at least initially. Instead, there may be a three way option, the choices

then being to stay in, to come out or to renegotiate. If there is a straight “in or out” choice, it is likely, on present form, that there would be a close vote. If there is a three way choice, however, it is very likely that the “renegotiate” option would be chosen. As the leaders of all the major political parties have made it clear that they want to stay in the EU, it is probable that, given a chance to do so, they might well choose the three way option rather than an “in or out” vote. This is because this approach may seem to provide them with the least difficult way ahead, at least in the short term.

### 3. **Where would this then leave us?**

A vote for renegotiation with all our major leaders declaring that they wanted to stay in the EU would, however, leave the UK in an extremely weak negotiating position. For a number of different reasons, the other Member States are going to be exceedingly reluctant to make any serious concessions to the UK in these circumstances. The EU has been built up from its inception on the basis that powers ceded by EU nation states to Brussels should never be returned to them – the so called process of *acquis communautaire*. If Brussels was to agree to make concessions to the UK, there would be plenty of other nation states with particular axes to grind who would want to follow the UK’s lead by making changes in their favour, but at other nations’ expense. The EU Commission would want to stop this happening at almost all costs. The existing structure within the EU is the result of compromises and agreements built up over decades, and once one part of it started being unpicked, there would be a danger that it would all start to unravel. If the Commission knows not only this but is also well aware that all the UK party leaders are going to support continuing membership whatever the outcome of the renegotiations, they will have everything to gain and very little to lose, at least in the first instance, by taking a tough line with those charged with the British renegotiation.

### 4. **What would the government then do?**

This will present the UK government with a predicament which they are all too likely to resolve by claiming that whatever concessions are secured – even if they are pitifully small - are a great triumph and the best we can possibly expect to get – exactly as Harold Wilson did in 1975. The Commission will very probably move just enough to provide the token changes which the government will need to have to be able to make this sort of claim. To avoid long term damage to the *acquis communautaire* it may well be that any concessions which are made – on the 48 hour working week, for example – will be time limited. There will, however, almost certainly be no radical changes at all. We will still be left with the Common Agricultural Policy and with the Common Fisheries Policy. We will still be paying in massively much more to the EU than we receive in return. We will still be over-regulated and left with little capacity to run our own trade and diplomatic policies.

Claims that substantial changes to our relationship with the other EU Member States had been achieved may not, however, be sufficient to head off pressure from the electorate for the opportunity for their views to be expressed in a further referendum . If this is held, the main political parties in the UK may nevertheless all advocate staying in the EU.

5. **What will the outcome of a referendum be likely to be in these circumstances?**

If the concessions made by Brussels were small enough, however, there must be a reasonable chance the outcome of this second referendum would be an “out” vote. It is therefore by no means certain that our leading politicians would achieve the outcome they want by going initially for a three way option. The fact that renegotiation had been tried and largely failed may make it more and not less likely that a second referendum would finish up with an “out” vote. It may, therefore, be the case that having an initial three choice referendum would lengthen the process of securing an “out” vote but would not preclude one from being achieved – and even make it more likely. There would then be a danger, however, that the government might take the line that a second referendum was not necessary, providing it with the opportunity simply to go ahead with implementing whatever renegotiation package could be secured. There are, nevertheless, also big risks with this strategy. It would still not provide the electorate with the opportunity to make its views clear as to whether the UK wanted to be in the EU or not and opposition to there still being no scope for a clear decision to be taken may be politically overwhelming.

6. **Where does this then leave those who do want to see radical changes made to our EU relationships?**

One clear certainty about our future relationship with the EU is that there is going to be no radical change unless sooner or later there is an “in or out” referendum and an “out” result. If none of our major political parties is prepared to fight a general election on an “out” platform, as appears to be the case, the only way of achieving this objective is through the referendum route. This is the only practical way of achieving the mandate and political impetus required, as a result of a clear decision by the British electorate. This is why there is a strong case for pressing for a referendum being held. There is also an increasingly high chance that this strategy will be successful.. With the political leadership at Westminster becoming more and more at odds with public opinion on the EU, and in particular its refusal to let the electorate have a say on an issue where there is clearly great interest, there must be an increasing temptation to agree to a referendum being held.. This would allow the party leaders to claim that they were happy for the electorate to be consulted even if they, at the same time, all strongly advocated our staying in the EU.

7. **What is the choice that the British people will have to make?**

For all the reasons set out above, it now looks increasingly probable that within the next few years – possibly within a year or two after the next general election – there will be an “in or out” referendum, either before or after an attempt at renegotiation has been tried. It is even more likely that there will be a referendum if the break up of the Single Currency produces a major crisis in the EU. What is the outcome likely to be and what will be the major influences on the way the vote goes? At this distance away in time, it is not easy to predict the outcome but it is clear what the crucial issues will be. While there is no doubt that a significant majority of the British people would far prefer us to have a much looser relationship with the other EU member states than we have now, there will also be fears that leaving the EU would both be disruptive as it happened and that it would leave the UK isolated if we were outside the EU club. It is always easier to win referendums which maintain the status quo than those which involve radical change. The key issue will then be whether a sufficient number of people can be persuaded that an “out” vote is the only way of getting the required alterations to our relationships with the EU states made and that the risks of disruption and isolation are small enough to make coming out of the EU a rational choice.

8. **What should eurosceptics do now to prepare for the future?**

There is thus a momentous choice looming up for the UK electorate for which not nearly enough preparation has yet been made. If the British people are going to have to make a crucial choice about the UK’s membership of the EU within the next two or three years, it is vital that they know as clearly as possible what prospects and consequences are likely to flow from whatever they decide. They know what being in the EU is like but not nearly so clearly what it would be like to be outside it. This is why the most important next steps are to prepare the ground by drawing up a clear way ahead for the UK, if the decision is to be to leave the EU and to re-establish our role as an independent nation. There are no insuperable obstacles but this needs to be explained and the electorate will have to be convinced. Inertia is going to be on the side of maintaining the status quo. Disengagement from the EU is going to require a degree of self confidence and audacity. The key question is whether those who are sceptical of the benefits of the UK’s EU membership can mobilise sufficient of the population to take their courage in their hands and to vote for a better future, run by our own democratic institutions.