

# LABOUR EURO-SAFEGUARDS CAMPAIGN

# **BULLETIN**

MAY 2015

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON

## LABOUR AND THE

## FORTHCOMING EU REFERENDUM

1. **How did Labour's stance on having an EU referendum go down with the electorate during the general election on 7th May 2015?**

As voting was taking place during the recent general election, Labour for a Referendum arranged for a poll to be done by ComRes on the impact on the way people voted as a result of Labour's manifesto commitment to opposing an EU referendum. There were, no doubt, many reasons why Labour did as poorly as it did on 7th May but it is all too evident that opposition to holding the referendum which most people want was one of them. The Labour for a Referendum poll showed that 71% of voters thought that it was "very" or "fairly important" to hold a referendum on whether the UK should stay in or leave the EU. Only 20% thought that it "not very" or "not at all" important, with 9% "don't know". As a result of Labour's manifesto being so out of touch with what most electors want, perhaps even more significant were the answers given to the question "If the Labour Party had promised to hold a referendum on the UK's EU membership, would you have been more or less likely to vote for Labour or would it have made no difference?" 13% of those who voted Conservative answered "more likely" as did 16% of Lib Dems and a very significant 30% of those supporting UKIP. Armed with this evidence, it is clear that, by not supporting what most people want on the referendum issue, Labour must have lost some key seats, particularly where there was a strong UKIP challenge.

2. **What conclusions should we draw?**

Faced with these figures, it is very hard to avoid the conclusion that the Labour Party has been well out of touch with the electorate because its attitudes to the EU is perceived by large sections of the electorate as being both undemocratic and too uncritical. It is not difficult to see what motivates most Labour Party members to being strongly in favour of our EU membership. Most are

instinctive internationalists. They believe that we should work closely with our European neighbours. They pay tribute to the role which the EU has played over the past decades in heeling the divisions which plagued Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. They recognise the importance of the EU's achievement in integrating the ex-communist countries into the western world. They welcome the record of the EU in promoting workers' rights in the Social Chapter. These positive attitudes to the EU, however, bypass the concerns which most of the electorate have about our EU membership. These include, in particular, worries about immigration, the very high net cost of our EU membership, lack of democracy and too much interference from Brussels – all of which those wedded to our EU membership at all costs overlook at their peril. Uncritical support for the EU does not reflect majority opinion among the electorate and misplaying Labour's hand over the coming months is therefore in real danger of doing two things which are in no way in Labour's interest as most Party members perceive it. One is further alienating Labour from the electorate by not supporting the renegotiation which most people would like to see being successful. The other is producing exactly the opposite result in the referendum, when it takes place, from what most Labour Party members say they want, as a result of not taking advantage of the renegotiation to help to shape the outcome in ways which will appeal to the electorate.

3. **What attitude should Labour now take to the referendum which is going to be held at the latest by 2017?**

The overall majority achieved by the Conservatives in the general election means that the proposal to hold an “in” or “out” EU referendum by not later than 2017 is bound to be in the Queen's Speech scheduled for Wednesday, 27th May 2015. Labour's attitude to this commitment may well set the tone for its policy on the referendum over the coming period. Is Labour going to accept the clearly expressed and democratically endorsed view expressed by the electorate that there should be renegotiation followed by a referendum? Or is the Party line going to be to continue to oppose a referendum being held and – during the run-up to when it actually happens – to decline to take a constructive role in arguing for changes in the UK's terms of membership? While those most strongly wedded to our EU membership may be tempted to take a generally oppositionist stance on renegotiation, this may both alienate the electorate, fail to take advantage of an opportunity for our EU membership to be changed in ways which most Labour people would support, and cause Labour to be accused of hypocrisy in taking part in a referendum in which the Party does not believe, all tending to make the electorate further disillusioned with Labour. The eventual outcome will be to make it more likely that there will be an “out” result when the referendum is held, which is evidently the last thing which those most in favour of our EU membership want to see.

4. **What could a constructive policy look like?**

Surely, the best way ahead for Labour on both tactical and strategic grounds is therefore to engage constructively in the renegotiation process which is already

getting under way. To put it positively, there are a number of arguments for this course of action being adopted. First, this is clearly what the electorate would like to see the Labour Party doing. Second, there are major renegotiation issues which need to be tackled and Labour is much more likely to be able to influence this process in directions which it would like to see being taken if it engages constructively as the renegotiations proceed than if it fails to do so. The reality is that, even if most Labour Party members have a strong overall inclination to seeing the UK staying in the EU, they also recognise that there is a considerable amount wrong with the EU which needs altering and their agenda for change is not actually that different in most respects from that of those who are more eurosceptic. There are, however, important differences between a constructive Labour and Conservative approach, especially round social policies such as the Social Chapter. For Labour, a policy of supporting renegotiation where there is common ground but taking a distinctively different attitude where objectives diverge therefore looks far the best approach.

5. **What damage could be done by wholesale opposition?**

Labour also needs to think carefully about what eventual outcome the majority of those in the Party want to achieve. The reality is that there is no certainty about which way the outcome of the referendum will fall and, whether or not there is an “in” or “out” result will depend very substantially on how well the renegotiation process goes. If it finishes up by producing very little movement away from where we are now on the major issues of concern to the UK electorate, there is a much greater chance of an “out” vote being the outcome. The prospect for substantial change being achieved thus depends to a large extent on the credibility of the risk of referendum producing a vote for Brexit concentrating minds in Brussels on the need to take the UK’s renegotiations seriously. As almost all the more realistic politicians in the EU realise, it would be a disaster for the EU if the UK were to decide to leave, while much of the UK agenda for change is supported by influential groups in the EU. The UK therefore has a reasonably strong negotiating position. The more, however, that this is weakened by people in the UK advocating our staying in the EU irrespective of the outcome of the negotiations, the less likely it is that the changes will be made which will actually produce an “in” result when the referendum is held. Again, there is an important dimension to this in terms of Labour’s relations with the electorate. Voters want the renegotiation to be successful and they will not be inclined to forgive Labour if it is perceived as standing firmly in favour of minimal pressure being put on the EU to achieve the changes which most people want to see being made.

6. **How should Labour handle the divided views there are within the Party on the EU?**

Another crucial issue is how Labour handles the fact that there are widely divergent views about the merits of our EU membership within the Party – a problem which is indeed clearly manifest in all our major political parties. Although Conservative Party members are on average considerably more

eurosceptic than those in the Labour Party, there are significant differences of view in both parties. Furthermore, once the referendum takes place and we know what the outcome of the renegotiations lead up to it are, there are going to be judgements to be made as to whether the package then on offer is acceptable or not. Decisions then to be made on whether to support an “in” or “out” outcome, and which to campaign for, are certain to become even more polarising. Attempts in these circumstances to impose whips and party discipline to try to force reluctant party members to vote one way or another *en bloc* are extremely unlikely to be successful in avoiding internal Party dissent, while further alienating the electorate. As happened with the Labour Party in 1975, it would surely be much better to allow Labour Party members to choose which way they wanted to go for themselves, recognising that there are strongly held differences of views which should not be regarded as being against fundamental Party principles. Is the Labour Party prepared to take this stance?

7. **What ought we all to be aiming for?**

It is clear from all the opinion surveys which have been done that the majority of the UK electorate is dissatisfied with key aspects of EU membership but would be willing to remain in the EU if sufficient changes to the terms of our membership were achieved, to make staying in a more attractive option than leaving. If this is the case, the stance taken by the current Conservative government is considerably closer to the sentiments of the electorate than those put forward recently by the Labour Party. Now, therefore, is the time for Labour to re-think its strategy. What, in summary, would this mean? We should tolerantly allow those with different views on the overall benefits of UK EU membership to put forward their views, but we should not allow those who are so strongly in favour of our EU membership that they do not think that we should fight for change to dominate Party strategy. Instead, we should adopt a policy of constructive engagement, recognising that the referendum is going to take place and that this is what the electorate wants. Labour should then support the government where its negotiating stance chimes in with the changes which Labour would like to see made, while reserving the right to differ on key issues where there is a divergence of view and also where there are genuine differences of opinion about the tone of the way negotiations are taking place. The UK is now embarked on a journey towards a referendum the outcome of which is going to make a huge difference to the future of both the UK and the rest of the EU. It is vital for Labour that we both reflect in as constructive a way as possible the views of the electorate and that we contribute to achieving the best possible outcome we can for our country – and to make these two objectives coincide with each other.