

CIB and the 2019 General Election

*The forthcoming general election will feature two high-profile pro-independence parties competing for your votes – the Conservative Party and the Brexit Party. Our chairman **Edward Spalton** reflects on CIB's long-standing status as a cross-party organisation, and our continued hope for either national or local understandings between pro-Brexit parties and candidates.*

My family was instinctively, bred-in-the-bone, double dyed-in-the-wool Tory – and definitely anti-socialist. At the time of the 1975 referendum, my father remarked, “I don't like this Europe business: there is something about it that doesn't smell right.” He paused and then added, “But that man Wedgwood Benn is against it. So there must be some good in it!”

Tony Benn (as he later styled himself) was a radical socialist and Labour Party man. The barrier of antipathy between parties was then so high, that his famous questions had not reached people like me and did not do so until years later. They were absolutely fundamental to the EU debate. I have spent much of my time since encouraging people to ask them, and reminding them who originated them. They were:

What power have you got?

Where did you get it from?

In whose interests do you use it?

To whom are you accountable?

How do we get rid of you?

Like many independence campaigners, I have belonged to several pro-independence groups over the years, including the right wing Freedom Association, the Bruges Group, the left wing Campaign Against Euro Federalism, and the cross-party Campaign for an Independent Britain, as well as being an early, enthusiastic member of UKIP from 1994 to 2000. It was on leaving UKIP to campaign on a cross-party basis that I joined the CIB committee.

It felt quite strange to start with working closely together with people from the Left in pursuit of our common aim of independence, but the urgency of the cause soon overcame that. I remember one meeting in the Midlands where a militant shop steward told us, "You may not like us, but you need us if you mean to win".

Over the years as elections approached, things in CIB were very British: we hardly ever talked about electoral politics. We would wish our colleagues from different parties good luck as we parted. After the election we would come back together and pick up the threads of what we had been doing beforehand; returning to the issues of the day – trying to persuade influential people in the main parties of the cause of independence and spreading the word.

After the referendum victory in June 2016, CIB reported to our members in our newsletter of September 2016, setting out two objectives which we described as concurrent and inter-related.

1. To secure a definitive constitutional and political settlement which places our country outside the jurisdiction of the EU political project: as far as humanly possible, it must ensure that never again can the United Kingdom be misled into becoming a subject part of any foreign jurisdiction or legislature.

2. To conclude a trade agreement with our European neighbours and Third Countries allowing for seamless,

unbroken continuity of trade, which is necessary to generate the revenue upon which the public credit of the kingdom, its defence and effective internal administration depend.

These objectives have proved more difficult to achieve than we expected! We did not specify timing but, for some years before the referendum, it became clear that negotiating international treaties for leaving the EU would be a complex, lengthy process rather than a single instantaneous event.

Now we have a new, different situation where two parties – the Conservative Party and the Brexit Party – each claims to represent the only true, achievable road to independence. These two pro-independence parties are competing for your votes. Meanwhile, it is said that the Remainers are agreeing amongst themselves on unity candidates.

The obvious danger is that the pro-independence votes may be split and that the first-past-the-post system could favour a Remainer victory against a pro-independence majority. We have tried to help avoid this situation without success – which leaves CIB members to choose for themselves what is the best course of action in their own constituencies.

We continue to hope for a national understanding, but think there may well be scope for local understandings and agreements in individual constituencies too – a bit of a mess, but that's the way things are. Failing a national agreement, we will all just have to muddle through.

We will try to give the maximum possible balanced information to members, bearing in mind that there are people on both sides of the Brexit/Conservative divide who have given outstanding service to the cause of independence over many years. Their views, if put in a temperate and reasonable way, are all worthy of respect and consideration.

CIB is and remains a cross-party organisation.

The Remainers we will refute to the utmost of our ability.