



The European Referendum: British and Local Perspectives

ESRC UK in a Changing Europe Seminar Series: Liverpool

City Library, Liverpool

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REPORT ON EVENT

EVENT OVERVIEW

The United Kingdom faces a momentous decision, whether to leave or to remain in the European Union. Voters, who will soon be asked to settle the matter in a referendum, are looking for more information and impartial analysis. At this Q&A event which was attended by over 60 people, we discussed the issues at stake with the help of a panel of academic specialists.

Among the matters we covered:

- The impact of the EU on the economy and jobs
- Immigration
- National sovereignty and the political implications of Europe
- Impact on Liverpool and the surrounding area

PANEL (L-R)

Jenny Stewart, Liverpool and Sefton Chamber of Commerce

Michael Keating, Centre on Constitutional Change

Richard Gillespie, Europe and the World Centre

Erika Harris (Chair)



INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

MICHAEL KEATING started by explaining that the EU embraces several different dimensions. He stated that the European Union is about more than just trade and an open market: the EU's single market is absolutely foundational, as is the concept of free movement. A second dimension referred to was environmental policy which the EU tackles on a large scale. Furthermore, he posed the question whether the EU should have a stronger social dimension and outlined the political dimension with regard to the EU's existing institutions, in order to stress once more that the EU is not just a common market. At this point, Keating connected the EU having a political dimension with the UK's issue of "a loss of sovereignty". He pointed out that the UK has always been critical of the EU.

Considering the current British political developments, he outlined the issues the Conservative Party under the leadership of David Cameron has focused upon. These issues included the questions of loss of sovereignty and migration. With regard to the latter, Cameron wanted to do something about the free movement of labour and welfare entitlements. A further concern was the question of the Eurozone. Owing to pressures within his own party, Cameron eventually committed to holding the referendum.

With these issues in mind, Cameron went into the re-negotiations with the European Union. He made clear that the idea of "an ever closer Union" was not acceptable to the UK. Apart from achieving this opt-out, the UK already has a number of others and now could find itself on the edge of Europe, for instance, as a kind of consultant to the Eurozone. He also secured a special arrangement with regard to the welfare sector, although a rather insubstantial one.

Keating concluded his initial remarks with two questions. *Does the UK want to be in the EU?* and *What will be the alternative to Europe, if the UK would vote to leave?*

JENNY STEWART began her presentation by referring to her personal experiences with regard to the European Union. Back in 1975 she was instinctively sure that Britain should remain in the EEC. Referring to the turnout of 65% in 1975, she reminded the audience that 67% of the British electorate had voted to stay in the EEC. Stewart then proceeded to report on the results of a national survey conducted by Liverpool and Sefton Chambers of Commerce. Asking some 300 businesses how they would vote in the upcoming referendum, 46% said that they favoured remaining in the EU but 42% indicated that they were ready to leave the Union. Answering a further question about how sure they were about their voting behaviour, 20% of them answered that they reserved the right to change their mind. She concluded by stating that businesses tend to like the status quo, bearing in mind that they are used to practical thinking.

RICHARD GILLESPIE stated that he had changed his mind since 1975 and now favoured British membership of the European Union, arguing that the arguments in favour were now as much about security as about other issues. In his opinion this was a result of the emergence of recent security challenges around and in Europe and the way in which the EU has evolved to address a

much wider range of issues than in the 1970s, when arguments were about the 'Common Market'. In addition, European security is looming larger as an issue given the trend of US withdrawal from Europe since the 1990s and refocusing of American strategic interest on the Asian/Pacific-region.

In Gillespie's view, the UK would be more vulnerable and less capable of tackling security challenges if the UK were to leave the EU. It could not rely solely on NATO for international reinforcement of its security provision, partly because of American dominance of the latter. Although the security dimension had played only a minor role in the early phases of the Brexit debate, the fallout from the Syrian conflict (along with Russia's new geopolitical assertiveness) meant it was likely to be influential. However, it was not just security concerns that made the UK better off within the EU: there was also an opportunity for Britain to remain influential as a European leader in the domain of security and defence policy. The UK has one of the most capable militaries in Europe, together with respected policy and security forces. Although the last few years, Britain had held back from a role in shaping European foreign policy, the EU offered the UK an opportunity to remain influential in international politics.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

During one hour long discussion, the following questions were debated:

1. What could happen that might shift the opinion of members of the panel to vote for or against continuing membership of the EU?
2. How would human rights and workers' rights issues be affected if the UK left the EU?
3. Which measures and actions could be taken to engage a wider audience and more people in the Brexit debate? Regarding the fact that there is not much information available, what would be the best way to provide information?
4. Most of the debate around the UK referendum concerns the national level, the debate has not involved the local level, yet. What impact would UK withdrawal from the EU have on a local level?
5. How will the dynamics of immigration in the UK change? How will the UK deal with refugees if it leaves the EU?
6. What would be the effects on EU citizens living in the UK if the UK leaves the EU? What impact would it have for UK citizens living in other countries of the EU?

7. How will a Brexit affect research funding?
8. What impact would Brexit would have for Ireland and for borders?
9. What is your opinion on TTIP?
10. What would Brexit mean for the rest of Europe? Would we be missed? What about Scotland if England votes to leave? What are the effects on Europe's stability in case of Brexit?
11. Please name 3 positive things why the UK should remain in the EU.

Acknowledgements

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