

Referendum

(II)

Why the Government believes that voting to remain in the European Union is the best decision for the UK delivered by HMG to every house in the country [= the UK, not the EU]; Nigel Farage, *Not Worth the Paper: the EU Referendum Deal* distributed by the EFD Group in the European Parliament; free download at http://www.ukip.org/r?u=https%3A%2F%2Fd3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net%2Fukipdev%2Fpages%2F3392%2Fattachments%2Foriginal%2F1458206191%2FReferendum_book.pdf%3F1458206191&e=a9a129e2e57fe9d31d904f85cfd588eb&utm_source=ukip&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=urcn_april_30&n=4

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Any sense of the identity of the United Kingdom expressed or presupposed by the Government pamphlet is low and shallow. This may not be surprising but is nevertheless a national disgrace. Eight of its sixteen A5 pages are filled with four-colour illustrations. Letterpress is not much over 1000 words, of which all but a small fraction are about the national economy, usually abbreviated to “jobs”. (On the economy, as we reported in an earlier column, the Government warns that leaving the EU risks a shock, loss of jobs and inward investment. No mention is made of the possible risks of staying in.) There are two undetailed brief glances at the greater national security supposed to be offered by membership. If this is all there is to the nation, why worry?

On this showing the best reason for voting Yes is to keep power in Brussels and out of the hands of the Westminster establishment, because the locals are uninterested in the character of the nation. On the other hand, the EU has, on principle, no political identity. Is it worth voting?

Nigel Farage’s pamphlet is for the most part serious and well written, though I wish he wouldn’t call the Prime Minister Dave. There is infinitely more sense of national character and history than in the Government pamphlet.

UKIP has been campaigning for an in/out referendum for a long time. The party was persuaded to adopt the policy principally by the present leader, Nigel Farage. I was always against it, and had the uncomfortable experience of opposing Mr Farage at the party conference that approved the policy. There were then and are still three objections.

First, it is unwise, and on the margins of the British constitution, to settle great matters by direct popular vote. The whole electorate is not the best judge. It is not uncommon to meet people who honestly say they will not vote because they don’t understand the matter (though I also report conversations with electors disgusted that the real issues are hardly mentioned by either side). “Brexit” would be much better enacted by the monarch in parliament. UKIP has pursued the referendum alternative partly out of exasperation at being unable to get influence in the Commons. But if only a minority of the three biggest parties are in favour of leaving the EU, the country is not ready to resume independence.

Second, UKIP will very likely lose. That may not be the end of UKIP, any more than it has been the end of the SNP, but there are those of us who cannot wait another forty years for the next referendum.

Third, whatever the result of the referendum, and despite Mr Cameron’s insistence that this is a once-in-a-generation event, it will not settle the question, any more than the Scottish referendum settled the question of independence for Scotland.

In the present situation there is a fourth reason for supposing the Referendum to be a bad way to decide. What happens if, against the most reliable forecasters', the bookies', odds, the majority votes NO and we leave the EU? The vital negotiations about terms would be left to politicians committed to staying in. Some have greatness thrust upon them. If they campaigned against independence what would they do with it? The likeliest outcome is a great effort to make NO as much like YES as possible. One thing that can be confidently predicted is that if Mr Cameron (or Mr Corbyn or whoever is now leader of the Liberal Democrats) negotiates the exit terms, nobody will be able to notice any difference—any more than anybody can see any difference made by the “renegotiation” Mr Cameron commends to us. (“On the doorsteps” canvassers inquire whether the voter can name a single change achieved by Mr Cameron’s single-handed “renegotiation”. A few have heard of restrictions on claims of health benefits by recent immigrants but most know of none.)

If UKIP loses, that need not be the end of the party, any more than a lost referendum was the end of the SNP. But UKIP would have to go back to its original policy of winning seats in the Commons, or supporting candidates of any party committed to “Brexit”.

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