

IF WE'RE GOING TO DO THIS AGAIN

by Simon Prentis

On the eve of the 'meaningful vote' Parliament has been promised over Theresa May's Brexit deal, the confusion and uncertainty amongst MPs and government ministers alike mean we may well now find ourselves having to run the EU referendum again. Our Prime Minister has shamefully labelled this idea 'a betrayal of democracy'. But as she must know, that is ridiculous. How could it be? With all the cards finally on the table, it is entirely reasonable to ask us to confirm that we really want our country to take this momentous step; there is nothing here to betray. If it turns out that we have not changed our minds after more than two years of debate, the result will be the same – and we can be sure we are taking the right step in leaving the EU. But if we have had a change of heart, as polls increasingly suggest, then the real betrayal of democracy would be not to ask us again – because the only thing that will have changed our minds is the facts.

So if we are going to vote again, those of us who argued from the start that we are better off staying in the EU should be careful not to fall into the same trap as last time. Project Fear does not work. People voted to leave because they were looking for a better future. That's a context in which hope always plays better than fear, even if the hope is based on half-truths and misrepresentation. If they believe things can only get better if we leave, people will not change their vote because they're told things might get worse – especially if they have swallowed all the untruths they've heard about the EU. So rather than warning of the likely consequences of leaving, we need to be clearer about the benefits of staying – and come down hard on the lies that persuaded people to vote Leave.

The first of these is the idea that we pay 'huge' sums of money to the EU every year. Without context, "£350 million a week" sounds like a lot of money to most people – but not only is that figure incorrect (our actual net contribution is around half that), what we pay to the EU is a mere fraction of the national budget. At 0.37% of GDP – just 1% of what it costs to run our country – it's less than half of the government's own admin costs, and under a fifth of the amount we pay, every year, to service the national debt. In more everyday terms, it amounts to less than the cost of a pint of beer per week per person.

That's all. A pint of beer a week. And what do we get in return? Even without considering regional funding from the EU that has transformed Northern Ireland and other neglected parts of the UK, the government's own estimates show that even in the best case, leaving the EU will cost us 3.9% of GDP. Turning that around, it means that the benefits of our existing membership of the EU – the cost savings and efficiency that come with tariff-free access to a single market – are worth over ten times what we pay for them. Which was the whole point of joining in the first place. Free trade benefits everyone. The 'huge' sums we pay the EU are not huge at all. Compared to what it buys us, it's a steal.

The next fake idea is that the EU is anti-democratic and dictatorial. This is such a big lie, it's hard to know where to begin. But we can start by asking Leave supporters to name just ONE directive issued by the EU that was imposed dictatorially or without inclusive discussion and debate, rather than as the result of a democratic process. They won't be able to. Because although much of what is achieved by the EU is done by consensus, nothing is done without being subject to a vote. These are decisions that we participate in at every level, from the European Council to the EU Parliament – where, by the way, we have many more MEPs than most other countries. Of the more than 2500 laws introduced since 1999, we have agreed 95% of the time – having only abstained on 70 issues, and been on the 'losing' side on just 56 occasions. That's not much to complain about. We may not be as well-informed about this process as we should be, but it's at least as democratic as our own parliament – and in many ways much more so.

But the worst lie of all is about immigration. First of all, if the concern is that there are too many foreigners in this country, the blame lies at the door of successive UK governments, not the EU. They have had (and still do have) the ability to control migration all along – even from the EU, if they had chosen to enforce our rights. The fact that they have not done so, and particularly that they have not controlled non-EU immigration – which was always greater than EU migration, even at its peak – tells us that our economy actually needs migrants. This is clear from the fact that as immigration from the EU declines, the non-EU numbers are going up. Secondly, in economic terms at least, there is no doubt that immigration is a net benefit to our country. People who come here from abroad do

so because they want to work. They are mainly young, ambitious, and pay their taxes. If the concern is that there is too much pressure on schools, hospitals and social welfare, our own government is again squarely to blame. Ever since Mrs Thatcher declared 'There is no such thing as society' there has been a shocking lack of investment in our country – both in public services and national infrastructure. As jobs went abroad and industries died, nothing was put in their place. This has been made all the worse by measures taken in the name of austerity, which has only further widened the gap between rich and poor. It is government policy, not immigration or the EU, that causes most of the hardships suffered by the poorest communities in the UK – many of which are in fact the recipients of valuable assistance from the EU Regional Development Fund.

What about our sovereignty, though? The great cry that went up from the Leave campaign was that they wanted “to take back control.” But again, the control that has already been ceded is due much more to our own policies than to those of the EU. Under successive British governments, key industries, public services and national rights have been sold off to foreign interests – including our fishing quotas, a significant percentage of which are now owned by other countries – thanks to decisions made here in the UK. Like all other EU member states, we are and remain in sovereign control of our own country. In the EU Council of Ministers, we have a veto over decisions relating to foreign affairs, taxation, justice and the EU budget. While our membership of the EU does mean that we belong to a larger democracy whose collective decisions we have to respect, this is simply part of the process of international cooperation we would have to engage with even outside the EU. The UK may be the fifth largest economy in the world, but there is a huge gap between the top two (the US and China) and the rest. Even without the UK, the GDP of the EU is larger than China, giving us, as part of it, much greater bargaining power and influence over world affairs than we could ever hope to achieve on our own.

These are the realities we face. As with any club, with membership comes restraints – you have to follow the rules and consider the views of fellow members. But what we gain from being in the EU is so much greater than what we lose. The future lies in cooperation, not confrontation. Let us all hope a second vote will allow us to have our future back.