



March 2016

Chairman's foreword

I warmly welcome you to the first edition of our newsletter which is focused on the Network's recent meeting, entitled *Perspectives on Britain's relationship with the European Union*, which took place at the Carlton Club at the end of January. The Network is committed to generating and vigorously promoting innovative thinking and ideas that support the effort of the UK to reform the European Union and persuade voters to support continued EU membership. It was in this spirit that our meeting at the Carlton Club was conducted.

By no means can it be said with any truth that we Tories are all Eurosceptics now. This would be to confuse those who wish to leave the EU come what may and those like us in the Network who wish to stay and win the battle for reform. So I am a reformist, but not a Eurosceptic. Nor can it be said with any truth that the EU is a European monster in its death throes. On the contrary, at every stage over the past 30 years, from the collapse of the Warsaw Pact resulting in the enlargement of the EU to the East, or more recently with the huge financial upheavals threatening our very survival like the 1930's, the EU has found a way to allow European countries to act collectively together.

In this century, isolationism is not an option. More cooperative action, not less, will be required. Looking ahead to the challenges facing our society, it is a mistake to believe that the world's problems on the environment, terrorism or the economy will be best served by going it alone. To preserve the multilateral system in a multipolar world, working together with those who share our core beliefs will be the best way to secure our prosperity and security. Those proposing that we should leave the EU provide no certainty that we will be better off outside, no clear strategy of how to achieve it and pretend that Brexit is like a walk in the park. Far from it. (see Prospect January 2016).

I trust that you find this newsletter informative and urge you to seek out more of content from our recent meeting on our website, www.secen.uk, and engage your own families and friends in the debate on the most important choice facing our country in a generation.

James Elles, Chairman

Conference highlights choice in EU vote

The South East Conservative European Network's conference, *Perspectives on Britain's membership of the European Union*, took place with the assistance of the European Conservatives and Reform Group (ECR) and highlighted the choice in the forthcoming referendum.

The programme was designed to be of interest to all, with personal views expressed from the academic, business and political sectors. The speeches and accompanying debates provided valuable insights which will surely help many take the biggest decision any of us has made at the ballot box for a generation. Below is a short summary of the key points made with the videos of the speeches and commentary available at www.secen.uk.





Richard Ashworth MEP, patron of the South East Conservative European Network, said in his introduction to the conference that he was surprised just how many people admitted that they had a low level of awareness of what the EU does more than four decades after the UK joined. He said that an information vacuum had been created into which myths and misunderstandings had been allowed to grow. It is Richard's hope that this vacuum can be closed during the referendum campaign and urged both sides to focus on facts and to articulate what the alternative to EU membership should be in order that the British people can make an informed decision on the most important question facing us today.



Robin Niblett, the Director of Chatham House, provided the international perspective by arguing that the Americans believe that Britain is stronger by acting as the gateway to Europe through its membership of the EU; they are confused about what the Government is trying to achieve in its negotiations at a time when there are so many risks to global security. He argued too that the Chinese are equally bemused about why Britain would want to withdraw just at the time that they are forging stronger economic ties with the EU, predominantly focused on Britain's gateway role.



In response, the Europe Minister, **David Lidington**, provided an excellent overview of the government's approach to the recent negotiations with our EU partners touching on the key topics of curbs on benefits and migration, parliamentary sovereignty, an opt out on ever closer union and recognition that the euro is not the only currency of the EU and ensuring a safeguard against the UK having to contribute to eurozone bailouts.



The voice of business was provided by SECEN Vice-Chairman **Mark Titterton** who argued that the 'out' campaign has yet to provide the detail needed on how Britain would trade with the EU - and at what cost - or how the UK would secure more beneficial trade deals with China and the U.S. who both appear to be now hedging their bets by moving closer to Germany and France. He argued that these were questions that needed to be answered otherwise it could be a case of 'better the devil you know' for business.



Damian Green MP, the former Immigration Minister, reminded the conference that there was no easy fix on this topic and posed the question about what would happen to the refugee camp and Britain's border control in France should it leave the EU. He speculated that France may be no longer willing to hold those refugees trying to get to this country in Calais and may allow their onward passage to Britain with all the challenges that would then create for managing them here.



Laura Sandys argued passionately for the need for those campaigning to stay in the EU to 'drop the jargon' and personalise their own story of why Britain's relationship with Europe matters, not just in relation to peace and security in the post-World War II era, but by linking the jobs they do and the lives they lead to the UK's membership of the EU.

There were thought provoking questions too from the audience on the issue of freedom of movement and ever closer union. Delegates were asked to consider the fact that if one had lived in tyranny for over 50 years, been invaded by foreign powers and had your travel restricted, then your experience of and demand for 'ever closer union' and freedom of movement is likely to be different to that of the U.K.



Business leaders wondered whether a competitiveness principle should be applied to every new piece of legislation or regulation introduced by the EU and suggested that the referendum ought to be seen as the beginning of the reform process rather than the end.



Syed Kamall MEP, the leader of the ECR Group, closed the conference by commenting that, currently, a third of the British people wish to stay in, a third would like to leave while a third have not yet made up their minds. Both sides of the debate had some strong and persuasive arguments but also had questions which they needed to answer honestly if the British people are to go to the ballot box and make a well informed choice on the biggest decision many will ever make in a polling station.

"The South East Conservative European Network is a beacon in encouraging debate on Europe in the Conservative Party and I hope other regions will follow their example"- Syed Kamall MEP

Over the coming weeks and months, SECEN will be making content available on our website. We hope that the site will be used by those seeking information about European issues and share insights and perspectives together. Hopefully, this will contribute to an informed choice as well as generate ideas that will maintain and expand Britain's reform agenda in Europe.

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