

European Union Referendum

Statement, dated Tuesday, February 23rd 2016, from Ranil Jayawardena, M.P.

For me, this is a question that I have been considering deeply, as it is a key issue facing our country.

First, it is right for me to highlight that my view is just that - my view. This is a referendum, where the people will decide the answer to the question, not politicians. Whatever their view, no Briton under the age of 58 has had their say on this question. I am immensely proud that this Conservative Government has legislated, through the European Union Referendum Act, to give 45 million people a choice on this important issue - remain or leave - and my view counts no more than yours.

Second, it is important that this is not treated as a party political issue. While there may be differences of views between parties, within a party and, indeed, between voters of the same party, differences should be respected and our collective attention should continue to be focused on the good government of the UK, both before, during and after the referendum. Further, I continue to have great respect for the Prime Minister, David Cameron MP, and he will continue to have my support whatever the outcome of the referendum.

Third, I simply want what is best for Britain. I believe Britain needs a better deal. I start, therefore, from the position that the status quo, an unreformed EU, is not an option. That's why I am grateful for all the energy that the Prime Minister has put into securing a better deal for Britain in the short time since the General Election.

To avoid any suggestion of bias, I have reprinted the BBC's succinct summary of the deal that the Prime Minister has secured, in full:

1. Child benefit - Child benefit payments to migrant workers for children living overseas to be recalculated to reflect the cost of living in their home countries;
2. Migrant welfare payments - The UK can decide to limit in-work benefits for EU migrants during their first four years in the UK. This so-called "emergency brake" can be applied in the event of "exceptional" levels of migration, but must be released within seven years - without exception;
3. Eurozone - Britain can keep the pound while being in Europe, and its business trade with the bloc, without fear of discrimination. Any British money spent on bailing out eurozone nations will be reimbursed;
4. Protection for the City of London - Safeguards for Britain's large financial services industry to prevent eurozone regulations being imposed on it;
5. Sovereignty - There is an explicit commitment that the UK will not be part of an "ever closer union" with other EU member states. This will be incorporated in an EU treaty change;
6. 'Red card' for national parliaments - It will be easier for governments to band together to block

unwanted legislation. If 55% of national EU parliaments object to a piece of EU legislation it may be rethought;

7. Competitiveness - The settlement calls on all EU institutions and member states to "make all efforts to fully implement and strengthen the internal market" and to take "concrete steps towards better regulation", including by cutting red tape; and

8. Some limits on free movement - Denying automatic free movement rights to nationals of a country outside the EU who marry an EU national, as part of measures to tackle 'sham' marriages. There are also new powers to exclude people believed to be a security risk - even if they have no previous convictions.

I believe this is a step in the right direction. Quite apart from my own view, however, this deal falls short of changes that were outlined in the Conservative Party Manifesto. For instance, on (1) above, the Conservative Party Manifesto - on which I stood for election - said: "If an EU migrant's child is living abroad, then they should receive no child benefit or child tax credit, no matter how long they have worked in the UK and no matter how much tax they have paid."

Looking solely at this part of the renegotiation for a moment, the deal falls short of what we sought. Yet if this were the sole point on which the UK had had to concede, perhaps it would be possible to overlook it when balanced with other successes in the deal. But it isn't. That's why I believe that, if Britain remains in the EU, we must have further change in the future.

A number of high profile figures who have concluded the same - that we should remain in the EU at this referendum - have also agreed that there is more to do. The Home Secretary, Theresa May MP, said of the deal: "The EU is far from perfect, and no one should be in any doubt that this deal must be part of an ongoing process of change and reform."

What are the reasons for remaining part of the EU and driving reform from within? At first glance, the most obvious benefit of working with our friends and neighbours in the EU is trade. Analyses of our trade record and prospects have shown that this is not necessarily the case, however.

The respected economists, Capital Economics, have said: "Official trade statistics show that the European Union is the destination for about half of all British goods exports. The trading links are bigger if we include the countries that the United Kingdom trades freely with because they have a free trade agreement with the European Union. These agreements mean that 63% of Britain's goods exports are linked to European Union membership."

On face value, this would be a good argument to remain within the EU. They go on to say, however: "It is highly probable that a favourable trade agreement would be reached after Brexit as there are advantages for both sides in continuing a close commercial arrangement. Contrary to the claims of many authors and commentators, it is probable that the impacts of Brexit on trade would be relatively small. Moreover, it is certainly possible that leaving the European Union would leave the external sector better off in the long run, if Britain could use its new found freedom to negotiate its own trading arrangements to good effect."

Turning from trade to our sovereignty, therefore, has been important to help me reach my own

answer to the question. The Lord Chancellor, Michael Gove MP, put it simply: "Our membership of the European Union prevents us being able to change huge swathes of law and stops us being able to choose who makes critical decisions which affect all our lives. Laws which govern citizens in this country are decided by politicians from other nations who we never elected and can't throw out."

Of course, even if we were to give more powers from the (unelected) European Commission to the (elected) European Parliament, the amount of judicial activism would remain a cause for concern. The totally unaccountable European Court of Justice is extending its reach every week, increasingly using the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights to give the EU more power and reach than ever before. These EU diktats may sometimes be humorous - the maximum size of containers in which olive oil may be sold, for instance - but they can also be lethal - the clinical trials directive, for instance, has slowed down the creation of new drugs to cure terrible diseases.

The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson MP, articulated this in his own inimitable style: "You have got a supreme judicial body in the European Court of Justice that projects down on this 500 million people territory a single unified judicial order from which there is absolutely no recourse. In my view, that has been getting out of control."

Further concern over sovereignty is exposed in next steps for this deal as, even if Britain were to vote to remain part of the EU, there is now the suggestion that the deal would still be subject to a vote of MEPs and potentially subject to revision by future Treaty changes. Additionally, there is to be no change to 'Qualified Majority Voting', which prevents HM Government from being able to block law that is to the detriment of our country. This demonstrates to me that the fundamental supremacy of European laws and institutions will remain in force and the sovereignty of the United Kingdom will continue to be impeded.

We have the fifth largest economy in the world. We are a member of the G7. Our security is provided under NATO not the EU. We have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which the EU has coveted for some time. We have historic influence and trading links across the world - particularly with the Commonwealth - and a special relationship with the United States of America. The idea that we are suddenly going to pull up the drawbridge and isolate ourselves, be cast adrift as an international pariah, or find ourselves under attack without allies is nonsensical. We are a global player and can thrive, not just survive, outside the EU.

I haven't come to this issue with an axe to grind. Indeed, while it might be true for others, the EU isn't the issue that brought me into politics. I have sought to serve North East Hampshire - first as a Councillor, now as your Member of Parliament - because it is where I grew up, went to school and live today. I have sought to serve the public because I want our children and grandchildren to grow up in an ever better country than we live in today - and I firmly believe that Britain's best days lie ahead if we take the right decisions today.

I hadn't reached my conclusion until the Prime Minister made his statement to the House of Commons on the 22nd February. Let me be honest. I had hoped that we could stay part of an indisputably reformed EU, in line with the Prime Minister's notable and rightly lauded Bloomberg speech. Unfortunately, his counterparts have not been willing to countenance such change.

Ultimately, if they are not willing to agree to changes for Britain that the British people voted for in a General Election - such as on child benefit - can we be confident that our national interests will be protected in the future?

Capital Economics concludes: "We continue to think that the United Kingdom's economic prospects are good whether inside or outside the European Union. Britain has pulled ahead of the European Union in recent years, and we expect that gap to widen over the next few years regardless of whether Brexit occurs."

As a result, I am drawn to consider the constitutional arguments over the economic arguments and I am minded that the deal before the country today is not good enough. Accordingly, I intend to vote to leave the EU.

This is just my view. It is for you, all my constituents, and the people of these great islands to decide whether we leave the EU or not. I know that some constituents and colleagues will honourably hold views that are at odds with mine. I will certainly respect the views of others, whether they are in line with my views or not, and I hope that you will adopt the same approach. It would be wrong for the referendum to divide us all unnecessarily. Indeed, I am still willing to be persuaded and, should a better deal be put forward now or in the future, I would consider such a proposal on its merits to determine whether I believe it is in the best interests of Britain and the British people. For me, that's what this is about - what is best for Britain.

The real purpose of a referendum is to give people the power to make a choice based on their honestly held views - and to direct politicians to enact that choice. Whatever your view and whatever the result, for me, the referendum will be the end of the matter and you can be assured that I will dedicate my time and effort into making the settlement - inside or outside the EU - work best for Britain.

Ranil Jayawardena, M.P.
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