

Sacrificing influence and control is not a price worth paying

Andrew Tyrie
Comment



Opportunities and risks come with both staying and leaving the EU. Politicians have handed the electorate a tough job.

They are not being helped by absurd claims and distortions of the truth in the campaign. Many voters are sick of it and almost everyone is weary and confused.

As the Treasury committee discovered in hearings, some of these claims are at best over-simplified. At their worst they are falsehoods.

The claim — placed by Vote Leave at the heart of their campaign — that Brexit would bring a £350 million per week fiscal “windfall” for the NHS is the most disgraceful. It is also the most prominent.

The Leave campaign are pledging to spend this “windfall”, and many times over, on the NHS, education, farming,

science and much else. They are persisting with what amounts to little more than bribery. The claim also has some of the corrosive properties for trust in politics as Tony Blair’s false prospectus on Iraq had in 2003. It is disappointing that Vote Leave persists with it. Voters should set aside this bogus £350 million-a-week claim.

There are no “killer facts” in this referendum. It will be down to people’s judgment on a balance of arguments.

Still, the issues can be boiled down to three: the economy, identity and security.

The Treasury committee looked in detail at the economic impact of Brexit. We concluded that a vote to leave would probably bring a short-term shock, reducing economic activity, and with it a lowering of living standards. Over the longer term, the picture is less clear. But the balance of the committee’s evidence strongly suggests that the downside risks from diminished access to the single market would outweigh any upside opportunities from trade with the rest of the world for an extended period.

Brexit could well leave the country poorer. But its supporters argue that, by retaking Westminster control over

decisions now made at EU level, the country would have more self-confidence. In the words of Arron Banks, the founder of Leave.eu, it is a “price worth paying”.

My own view is that much of the control that might come, post-Brexit, would be illusory. Britain would still need to negotiate with the EU in pursuit of the national interest, whether in or out. It’s called international relations. From outside, the UK would lose influence over decisions that nonetheless profoundly affect the economy.

Those who claim that this influence is illusory need to explain the UK’s exemption from the eurozone, Schengen, the migrant quota system, banking union, among much else. The UK cannot dictate. And the EU can be a very frustrating place to do business. But Britain’s influence is certainly not negligible.

Those who blame EU bureaucracy and red tape for the country’s ills ought to bear in mind that, just as the deep problems facing the country in the 1980s were addressed by Margaret Thatcher’s programme of radical domestic economic reforms, so the UK’s principal challenges today —

among them housing, infrastructure, maths and science levels in schools, and a very complex tax system — remain largely or entirely problems for the UK parliament to resolve.

Greater control over EU immigration is obtainable with Brexit. But it seems unlikely that the EU would be prepared to negotiate anything resembling current levels of single-market access without the retention of a high degree of free movement of labour. That free movement would also be demanded by many millions of UK citizens who would want to live and work in EU countries.

As for Britain’s security and safety, both the EU, and the EEC before it, have made an enormous contribution to the stability of Europe, second only to that of Nato. The absorption of Europe’s eastern half into the family of western nations in the 1990s, after the collapse of communism, is one of the continent’s greatest and most underrated success stories, and one in which the EU played a crucial role.

More challenges are coming. Russia has recently invaded two countries, and challenged the right of others to participate with the EU and Nato. Albeit in an attenuated form, a core

objective of the original EEC — the need for an economic counterpart to Nato — is relevant for Europe again.

The electorate will attach different degrees of importance to economic, “control” and security issues. Most people — including in evidence to the Treasury committee and Brexiteer economists — have concluded that there will be at least a short-term economic cost to leaving. I found some of the evidence taken by the foreign affairs committee on the importance of the EU to the UK’s security persuasive.

Some may disagree on both points. But even if they don’t, they may yet feel that the risks to the economy and security would be a price worth paying for greater control. Others will conclude that safeguarding the benefits that can come from negotiating from within — rather than outside — a body which will remain central to the UK’s future, is decisive.

These are the key judgments.

Perhaps the leavers have the simplest points. But the remainers have the better of the arguments.

My vote will be to remain.

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