



Geoffrey Van Orden's

eDispatch

From Brussels and Strasbourg

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 Conservatives



*"I didn't become an MEP in order to promote the EU - I want us to govern our own country. I go to Brussels to speak up for British interests and for the people of the East of England. My priorities are the prosperity and security of the United Kingdom." **Geoffrey Van Orden MEP***

EU REFERENDUM - THE PERILS OF JUMPING TOO SOON

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

We got a bad deal when we joined the EU. Successive governments - with the honourable exception of Margaret Thatcher - have been naive and weak in defending our interests, until now. I know that there are some who refuse to recognise this, but **we again have a Prime Minister prepared to change the terms of our EU relationship**. Britain's EU membership, and the terms of it, have become an irritant for most and source of anger for many in our country - me included, I have to deal with the EU on a daily basis. But they are not questions to be taken lightly.

This issue is not just about bent bananas, accounts not signed off and the nonsense of the Parliament's 'second seat' in Strasbourg - important as these points are. It is about having a say in a political bloc twenty miles across the Channel, that will still be there whether we are in it or not; about unfettered access to a market of 500 million people; about reassuring foreign investors in Britain; and about our wider standing in the world. It is also very much about our national sovereignty - governing ourselves, without the constraints of other people's unnecessary rules; our ability to pursue our national interests in the world; and our long-standing relationships with countries of British heritage that are not part of the EU.

ONLY CONSERVATIVES WILL DELIVER AN IN/OUT VOTE ON THE EU

The Prime Minister will give the British people an in or out vote on Europe in 2016/2017 - after re-negotiation of Britain's position and provided, of course, that a Conservative government is returned in 2015.

Some say that a. Cameron promised a referendum before and failed to deliver (that is not true) b. There is no possibility of re-negotiation (also not true). Their illogical conclusion is to vote for UKIP - producing precisely the opposite result to the one they say they want.

UKIP might win one seat at Westminster. But that will be it. Elsewhere they will merely undermine the Tory vote and ensure that Labour get in. We've already seen this effect in our loss of control of Norfolk County Council, which - thanks to UKIP - now has Labour back in power. Poor support for Conservatives in the European elections next May will have a similar effect as the bandwagon rolls on to May 2015. **It is so important that Conservatives actually vote Conservative.**

AN EARLY REFERENDUM

Now we have another ingredient in the mix - a call for the referendum to be held before the General Election, rather than in 2016/2017.

A moment's thought will show the dangers of this. Politically, it would split the Conservative Party in the run-up to the General Election and remove the need to vote Conservative in that election in order to ensure a referendum. Of course, these are precisely the reasons why Labour might well support the idea!

Those that doubt the commitment of a Conservative government to deliver on its referendum promise should be reassured by the Private Member's Bill ("European Union (Referendum) Bill") making its way through the Commons at the moment - tabled by James Wharton MP and supported by David Cameron. This would make the holding of a referendum a legal requirement.

If Adam Afriyie's proposed amendment - for the referendum to be held early, in October 2014 - were to be successful, there is a strong likelihood that the Bill as a whole would then fail to get support.

And what if the referendum did take place in October 2014 and the vote was to stay in! Then we would have no grounds for renegotiation and would be stuck with an unreformed EU plunging onwards to a European Federal state. If there are reasons why Britain should stay in **a reformed EU**, doesn't it make sense to have the negotiations first and only then put a new Treaty to the vote?

There are good reasons for the vote to be in 2016/2017. The call for change is not just coming from the UK but from other countries as well. Some share some of our views. But many of them want change in the opposite direction to us - with a push for more integration, starting with a banking union within the Eurozone. Regardless of the direction of travel, the changes that are being demanded by us and them will, to my mind, require Treaty changes. In fact, they are so fundamental that a new EU Treaty will be needed. This takes time to negotiate. There will be a new European Parliament in July 2014 and a new Commission in place in January 2015. On past form, it will then take about 18 months to carry out the negotiations. Then each country needs to ratify a draft treaty according to its own constitutional procedures. In our case that means a referendum.

If James Wharton's Bill is successful, the referendum must be held before 31 December 2017 and the date for this must be set by 31 December 2016. That sounds about right.

THE RIGHT WAY AHEAD

These matters are too serious to be left to emotional whim. I would leave the EU if we can't change it, but **I believe we need to try and get the reforms we want before deciding.**

I also believe that, over the coming months, the Prime Minister should set out very clearly what he wants to change.

In his speech at the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester just over a week ago William Hague was adamant about what had to be done in terms of EU renegotiation:

"Cosmetic change is not enough, we want real change!"

For the rest, **the economy has turned for the better; immigration is down** and, with the measures underway, will begin to fall significantly; **schools are getting better; welfare abuse is being gripped; crime is down;** and there is **major investment in rail and road** improvement. Not bad for starters!

Now is the time to rally to the Conservative cause and turn a deaf ear to the peddlers of snake oil.

Maybe I've missed something in my reasoning? I very much welcome your comments.

Please do not hesitate to ask for more information on any of the many topics on which I am engaged.

I welcome invitations to speak throughout the East of England

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