

LI Members' Weekend Alicante 30 Oct to 1 Nov 2015

Malcolm Hardy, Chair LI Costa Blanca

"Expatriate Votes could make a big difference to the result of a closely fought EU in/out referendum" was the message given by Mike Gapes MP at a Labour International Conference held in Alicante last weekend to launch their campaign to "Remain" in the EU, attended by members from France, Belgium, Germany and other parts of Spain.

There are some 2-2.5m Brits living and/or working in the EU, hence it is vital that those who are eligible to vote start the registration process immediately and cast their vote when the time comes. All British citizens living EU for less than 15 years can register as Overseas Voters at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote

David Cameron has not picked a date for the Referendum yet although it must be held before the end of 2017. "The problem for Cameron is that in 2017 there are General Elections in France and Germany, respectively in May and August, and they would not welcome the possibility of a Brexit at the same time. Also Britain holds the Presidency of the EU in 2017 hence Ministers and Civil Servants will be restricted on what they can say during the Referendum" added Mike.

"This brings it forward to next year, 2016. Cameron has already ruled out holding the Referendum at the same time as the London Mayoral, Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections in 2016. And it would not be in October as it would clash with Conservative Party Conference. So, in my opinion, we would be likely to see a Referendum in April, June or September 2016. Hence the reason for the urgency for expats to sign up for their vote a.s.a.p."

The UK Electoral Commission will only allow one government funded group for each of the Remain and Leave campaigns. The pro-EU "Britain Stronger in Europe" will be headed by Sir Stuart Rose, ex boss of Marks & Spencer, with Will Straw as Chief Executive.

The separate Labour Yes Campaign to stay in the EU, is headed by Alan Johnson MP and supported by Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn, whatever the outcome of Cameron's negotiations, because we believe the British people including those living outside the UK will better staying in the EU. Mike said "We recognise that the EU needs reform but it can only achieved by staying in"

"The out campaigners have no consistent vision of Britain's relationship with Europe after an exit" said Mike. There are those who want to withdraw from the institutions of the EU but remain in the single market. This is the Norwegian option which Labour and others have ridiculed long before Cameron did so on his recent visit to Iceland. Norway has to pay in to the EU as we do and accept the free movement of labour but they have no say in the decisions and directives that are binding on them. Norwegian MPs are always asking Labour MEPs to help them. A Swiss option based on individual deals is giving them problems as they have access only to parts of the EU market, excluding financial services, which is very important to the City of London.

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The Outsiders refer to possible deals with Commonwealth countries but they already have established trade deals. Australia and New Zealand with the EU anyway, and Canada is in NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), the USA government want the UK to remain in the EU and would prefer a Trans-Atlantic deal (TTIP) with the EU as a whole, China wants us to stay in also.

The lives of ordinary British people have benefited from the EU in the areas of the environment (eg cleaner beaches), working rights, pensions and other social policies. "The EU has stopped a 'race to the bottom' on these issues in individual countries - this is why the right wing really want us to leave Europe" said Mike.

Some 45% of our trade is with the EU, with some 500m consumers. Only 6.6% of our exports went to the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India & China) in 2012. Furthermore some £26.5bn of investment is directed into the UK because we are in the Single Market thus generating jobs. Our car exports to the EU would be hit after Brexit by having to face their tariff barriers. "This is what business leaders are telling George Osborne. No wonder Cameron is playing down the outcome of his negotiations" added Mike.

On immigration, Norway, outside the EU, takes in more migrants per head of population than we do. Our relationship with France helped to get a deal on the Sangatte camp in Calais to control the flow of migrants across the Channel. That cooperation would disappear if we quit the EU.

With a UK exit many EU collaborative initiatives would be jeopardised. These include the EU Arrest Warrant, the Commission's attempt to help conflict refugees that started with Libya before any UN resolution, and sanctions on Russia over their annexing of the Crimea. Our standing in the world would be diminished in the UN Security Council, NATO and Climate Change talks.

Over the weekend Labour International members deepened their relationship with our Spanish sister party, PSOE. On Friday evening the recently elected mayor of Alicante, Gabriel Echávarri, mingled with delegates over drinks and tapas at the MARQ museum restaurant. Herick Campos, one of Alicante's MPs, addressed the Conference on Sunday morning outlining PSOE's campaign to win power in the upcoming Spanish General Election on 20 December.

Malcolm Hardy
Chair LI Costa Blanca
4 November 2015