

The First (and Last) Referendum Party Conference¹ by Peter Etherden

While our merry band sailed from Rye with the ebb tide past Beachy Head to Brighton for *The Referendum Party* conference, the hacks sailed down from London expecting a combination of 'glitzy parties' with 'Little Englanders' spouting 'mad xenophobia'.

And this was what most reported in the Sunday papers. The only mystery was whether they had actually been in the *Brighton Centre* at all to see 5000 serious-minded people, the largest party conference ever in Britain, listening to an impressive range of eloquent, fact-packed speeches, prompting one observer to say it was 'in a different league' from any conference he had attended. It was a pity the vast crowd inspired by this extraordinary event will be left with such a jaundiced view of British journalism with only the Daily Telegraph's chief political correspondent Robert Shrimmsley maintaining a balanced view and reporting (rather than adding editorial spin) to the news.

The theme of the day was not 'xenophobia' but the threat to democracy all over Europe from a bureaucratic system that is increasingly off the rails. One example. Lying disregarded around the Westminster Parliament at its state opening was a boring-looking document of 24 pages headed '*Statutory Instruments Etc.*' Compared with the mere 13 Bills proposed for the next session, this listed no fewer than 413 new laws going through the system, rubber-stamping decisions already arrived at in Brussels.

These regulations were by no means all trivial. They ranged from new rights of entry by officials into private houses to decisions involving hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. British fish is being stolen this way. British gold, shipped across to America for safe-keeping in 1942, will be looted in similar fashion. And by this route Brussels will make Robert Maxwell look like a bit player when, in the words on one of the conference speakers, Terry Smith (author of the bible on creative accounting '*Accounting For Growth*') 'Britain is forced to take a share of the unfunded (pension) debt of other European countries...at a staggering, almost impossible cost to every man, woman and child in the UK of nearly £ 21 000 each.'

The gravity of the crisis was underlined in the morning sessions with excellent speeches on the constitution, the economy and the bureaucracy. In the afternoon there were four Members of the European Parliament...two French (including de Gaulle's grand-son), one Dane (dryly funny) and a distinguished German, Manfred Brunner...as well as the leader's address from Sir James Goldsmith.

The conference opened with a powerful video, shown on two large screens, which set the tone for the day as images of the betrayal of Britain in Europe flicked in front of the hall. It was almost a roll call of the guilty men - Sir Edward Heath, Lord Howe, Douglas Hurd. It focused on a sinister-looking European Court judge before moving to the main enemy, Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor.

He was filmed, swaggering along a corridor, grinning and shaking his head at British scepticism and quoted as saying he would make European union 'irreversible'. In one remarkable scene, the video cut from his face to an image of tanks rolling through a village street.

Having set the tone, the speeches followed suit, building up a case for either British withdrawal or major reform. Lord Tonypanody, the former Commons Speaker, said: 'History has taught us that when a German Chancellor outlines his plans, it is criminal irresponsibility not to take them seriously'.

Sir James echoed the theme reminding his supporters of how modern Germany was created after separate states were forced into a German superstate dominated by Prussia. Britain was in a similar situation. It had joined a Common Market which had turned into a European Union and was now being led blindfold into a federal superstate.

By Monday the tabloids had changed their tune with '*The Sun*' editorializing on 'The Goldsmith Effect' as the 'big imponderable' in the next election. '*The Financial Times*', in a measured piece on the day of the conference had given substance to this effect. '...Goldsmith's marketing barrage will eventually increase the 'salience' of the EU as an issue. Were this to induce more voters to become relatively committed sceptics, the beneficiaries could be the Tories, given Labour's decision to fight as a pro-European party'.

And he continued '...Goldsmith's advertisements are the ones John Major would like to issue under his own name, but cannot without splitting his party'. This theme was taken up in Sir James' conference speech. 'Michael Portillo', he declared, 'proclaimed that the (Tory) Party's three policies were 'unity, unity and unity'. 'How's that for a single issue party!', he added with the timing of a stand-up comedian.

¹ Original title: *The First (and Last) Referendum Party Conference* was prepared for *Fourth World Review* and published under the title *Guilty Men*. [Ed. 30th October 1996].

Later on in the speech, Sir James addressed directly the accusation that *The Referendum Party* was a single-issue party. 'So it is', he explained. 'But can there be a bigger and more determining issue? The other parties have no issues. Their electoral promises are almost totally empty...How can it be otherwise when the very powers needed to make good on the bulk of their promises are being handed over to Brussels.'

'Until we have settled the fundamental question of who governs Britain, Westminster or Brussels, the gesticulations of all political parties are no more than that, gesticulations...The other parties just seek power of office. But that power will be in Brussels. So they will only get the privileges and not the power. Perhaps privilege without responsibility is what suits them best'.

As to the idea that a vote for *The Referendum Party* is a wasted vote. 'Wrong', insisted Sir James. 'It is the only vote which counts. A vote for *The Referendum Party* is your chance to decide whether Britain will bring home her right to self government. A vote for the other parties is a vote for Brussels'.

And he followed this up by paying homage 'to those MPs from the left and from the right who have fought for a referendum. They have put nation above party, they have sacrificed their own careers; they have confronted conventional wisdom and they have accepted with fortitude the consequent abuse. And they have stood firm. They restore dignity to politics. They stand out as honest men, indeed heroes...'

Asked his personal views, Sir James replied that the opinion polls suggested the British people hold four principal views about Europe. In his opinion a fair referendum should accommodate the existing diversity of views with four options presented.

The four options were: withdrawal from the EU; support for a federal Europe; a Britain that retains only free trade links with the EU; or (his preferred route) a 'family of sovereign European nations which cooperate when we can do things better together than separately'.

When sneered at by the Tories as a billionaire financier with a rabble army as his latest passing fancy, Sir James retorts that the £2 million spent on the conference and the £20 million pledged to *The Referendum Party* is small change compared to the £200 million Brussels spends each year on propaganda and promotion of European integration...adding that only an immensely rich private individual could stand up to the embezzlement of public funds on such a scale.

John Papworth takes a different line. 'Sir James is an example to other rich people', he remarked to me the other day. 'I wish more of them would use their money for something that really matters'. Sir James Goldsmith has long been an avid reader of *Fourth World Review*.

Six months ago I would not have given *The Referendum Party* a dog's chance of saving more than a handful of deposits and would have put their tally of MPs at precisely zero.

After their conference I am prepared to bet *The Referendum Party* will be level pegging with the Labour and Tory parties (and in constituencies where they ran first or second last election, also the Liberal Democrats) in the hundred or so critical marginal seats. From these they could win a couple of dozen seats. Their popular vote will be in line with Perot's 19% level of the 1992 US presidential elections and well ahead of Sir James' own 13% in the last French Euro-elections.

£20 million, equivalent to the Labour and Tory parties' electoral war-chests, will buy a lot of special effects...and *The Referendum Party's* research department and regional-based party organization (60 000 members today and 400 000 by election time) are rapidly becoming second to none.

In his autobiography 'Flashbacks', the late Tim Leary explained how he was flung into a federal jail 'for the duration' when it was discovered that he intended to commission his Hollywood supporters to make a full-length feature film of his election as California's governor...for release in the three weeks leading up to the election.

'Politics', as *The Sun* pointed out, 'usually bores the pants off most people. But it won't over the next six months'. James Goldsmith, just like Timothy Leary, will make sure of that.

© Peter Etherden 1996

The Referendum Party in Five Minutes

I am Peter Etherden
I live in Rye...a small town on the south coast of England
I travel to Boulogne more often than Ashford or Hastings
I am a committed European
My son studies engineering in Sweden
My daughter is fluent in Spanish...and her best friend's father is French

But I live in Rye because it is English
And I love its Englishness
This Englishness is being destroyed
Not by invasion from without...nor by corruption from within
But by stealth...stolen by a thief in the night

Now I have decided enough is enough
I want a nobler Europe...a Europe of the people
Governed by the people...and for the people
But this is not the way it is going
The Referendum Party is going to change that
Our aim is to secure a fair referendum
On this country's future in Europe

Twenty years ago we voted for a future as part of Europe
Our politicians told us this would mean we could...
Go to Bruges or Salzburg without a passport
Buy wine, beer and 'baccy at French prices
Compete for contracts in Dresden on a level playing field

The politicians lied to us
They were embarked on their own private millennium project
To create a United States of Europe

To forge a new national identity
To rub out my Englishness
And turn me into a European
Not into the noble English European I am
But the small-minded grey-suited money-grubbing Europeans they are

This Europroject is now on auto-pilot
And it must be stopped
The British people do not want to be ordered around by Berlin
They do not want the health police from Brussels
Breaking down the door of their local butcher
At five in the morning...French European Time
A tiny political caste has hijacked our right
To choose who governs us

We lend our power to politicians
We lease it to them for five years...then we expect it back
As The Referendum Party we are saying
Return the power borrowed from the people of Britain
We will decide our own future in Europe
We insist on being consulted

As a party we do not want to form a government
We do not hope to hold the balance of power in a hung parliament
We do not have ambitions to be career politicians in Westminster

As a party we have no interest in whether you agree with
Tony Benn or Ken Livingstone
Or Margaret Thatcher and Virginia Bottomley
We are not the National Front in sheep's clothing
We are not Little Englanders
Nor are we...as the Tory Party portrays us
The plaything of a foreign billionaire
Standing on a single issue platform

The Referendum Party is saying Yes to Europe
But as a party we are also saying
A Nobler Europe is only possible by first saying
No to Maastricht...a treaty too far in Margaret Thatcher's words
No to the Euro...and other devices for creating a European Superstate
No to Government by Bureaucracy
No to Government by Regulation and Decree...from foreign courts

in a 15 minute talk Maastricht Made Simple would be presented here

This election may be your last chance
Once power has slipped away to Brussels
It won't matter who you vote for in British elections
Your Members of Parliament will be men of straw
Tony Blair will not have the power to reduce income tax to ten percent
John Major will not have the power to allow our farmers to grow healthy crops

in the 15 & 10 minute talk local issues would be introduced here

But a vote for The Referendum Party will change this
As a party we are saying
Let the People Decide if Westminster or Brussels governs Britain
As a party The Referendum Party has one policy...and one policy only
To obtain a fair referendum on Britain's future in Europe
Once we have secured this...we will dissolve the party.
Now let us hear what you think...starting with your questions.

© Peter Etherden 1996