

Labour and a New Europe

Rt Hon George Howarth Labour MP for Knowsley

There is one overriding reason why a referendum is necessary: as presently viewed by much of the electorate, the EU is seen as a creature of the political classes. Part of UKIP's appeal reflects that disconnect. They are seen as the voice of the anti-political class, which connects more with people's own instincts.

Moreover, the manoeuvring over when and under what circumstances a referendum would be held has, over recent-years, created the impression of the EU being a project which has politicians dancing on the proverbial head of a pin. In turn, this reinforces the feeling that it is an obsession of the political classes and remote from people's real lives.

Labour's position on the EU as a party is superficially far less difficult than that of the Tories. Such divisions that do exist within Labour's ranks are not of great substance but, rather, of nuance. Consequently, Labour is not as fundamentally and corrosively divided as the Tories who are nervously looking over their shoulders at UKIP who, themselves, are looking over their own shoulders at a sepia-tinted past which never actually existed.

Labour's difficulty is more subtle, but still needs to be addressed. Labour cannot be seen to be purely and uncritically pro-European, as that image leans too much towards the corner of the discredited political classes.

Labour's narrative, therefore, needs to describe the sort of Europe that it is hoping to accomplish, coupled with an agenda which would set out what its aims are, both thematically and politically, and with a commitment to holding a referendum at the end of a negotiation aimed at delivering a new Europe.

There are several themes which can be readily translated into a distinctively Labour agenda. Properly presented, they can be dovetailed into the 'One Nation' narrative.

So, what would a distinctively Labour new Europe look like? And how can such an approach be dovetailed into Labour's One Nation narrative?

There are a number of obvious candidates. First, re-balancing the single market with a series of fairness at work objectives on such things such as agency working, training, job security and adopting ideas such as David Sainsbury's progressive capitalism; second, a clear and ethical approach to external trade with the EU, taking a more active role in international trade negotiations and third; a new approach to regional structural funds, with a recognition of the vital role of city regions within the UK and wider Europe and building a stronger and more direct relationship between local government and EU distribution mechanisms.

In addition there are other themes that are less distinctively Labour but are important in terms of the UK's broader interests. First, reform of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with a new emphasis on sustainable agriculture, price stability and food standards.

Secondly, we need to take a cold and sober look at the UK's net contribution to the EU in order to form a realistic negotiating aim.

Thirdly, although not strictly an EU matter, we need to evaluate whether or not the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) can be modernised to meet the new challenges posed by mass migration, organised international crime and Islamist terrorism.

A two-step approach of renegotiating a progressive new settlement for a fair, balanced new Europe in which business, trade and fair employment hold equal status and, once that programme is complete, putting the prospectus for a new Europe to the electorate in a referendum is potentially politically attractive and can be built into a coherent One Nation narrative.

If that can be achieved – and it is a big if – the European issue could be settled within the UK for a generation.