

How the polls exaggerate support for membership of the EU

The questions asked by pollsters do not reflect the realities of withdrawal - and thus play into the hands of the Federalists

By Anthony Scholefield

Do opinion polls accurately reflect the British electorate's desire to remain in the European Union?

During 2000 and 2001 MORI obtained the following responses to the question:

'If there were a referendum now on whether Britain should stay in or get out of the European Union, how would you vote?'

2000

| | Sep | Nov |
|------------|-----|-----|
| Stay in | 43% | 49% |
| Get out | 46% | 44% |
| Don't know | 11% | 7% |

2002

| | Mar | Apr | May |
|------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Stay in | 39% | 48% | 43% |
| Get out | 42% | 43% | 41% |
| Don't Know | 19% | 9% | 16% |

Meanwhile, in 1999, ICM recorded answers to a BBC European Elections Poll question with a greater margin in favour of staying in the EU:

'Do you think that Britain should continue to be a member of the European Union or should it withdraw?'

| | |
|------------|-----|
| Continue | 57% |
| Withdraw | 27% |
| Don't Know | 16% |

On the face of it, the questions asked by ICM and MORI seem well balanced. Withdrawal and continued membership seem to point in directly

opposite directions and to provide the voter with clear-cut alternatives. But in reality what do 'get out' and 'withdraw' actually mean? Quite clearly, a decision to leave the European Union would lead to a change in Britain's international status. This could mean total independence, negotiation of a free trade area with the EU, or membership of NAFTA or membership of some other economic/political grouping. In other words there are a range of options for a 'withdrawn' United Kingdom.

Heroic Isolation

Moreover, membership of the EU is not a static phenomenon. The present Convention on the Future of Europe is discussing further integration. Additionally, it is likely that other countries will join the EU in 2004. Similarly, withdrawal is not the end game of those who want to leave the EU, it is a stage in the journey to a different international status. To offer withdrawal or membership of the current EU is to present voters with a wholly unrealistic choice.. The real choice is not between continued membership of the EU as it is now and heroic isolation, but between membership of an expanding and integrating political entity and a different kind of relationship with EU members.

If the question is reformulated on the basis of these realities it might take one of two possible forms:

'Do you think that Britain should be

further integrated in the European Union of 25 states?'

or

'Do you think that Britain should change its relationship with the European Union to joint membership of a European free trade area?'

This first question sets up what is on offer from membership of the EU - that is not a static relationship with the EU as now constituted - but participation in further Treaty-making leading to closer integration via the proposed new Treaty plus enlargement. The second deals with the most likely course of action should Britain withdraw from the EU and reflects what most of those advocating withdrawal actually want to see happen. My hunch is that very many more people would say no to the first question than currently back continued membership, and that many more would say yes to the second than currently back withdrawal.

Free Trade Area

Thus, from the point of view of political tactics, those who wish to get out of the EU should cease to talk about 'withdrawal' and instead advocate 'changing Britain's relationship with the EU to joint membership of a European free trade area'. We should not allow the terms and parameters of the debate to be effectively controlled by our opponents, which is what is happening now.

The authentic voice of Vichy

"I have said, and I repeat, that war is *always* the worst solution.[our italics]" President Chirac, speaking in Paris on 22nd October 2002 on the possibility of a war in Iraq.