

York Union: This House believes that Britain is better off out of the EU

By [Ciarán Morrissey](#), Comment Editor (2015/16)

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Image: York Union

On the 11th November the York Union staged yet another topical and controversial debate about the modern British politics. This time it concerned Britain's membership of the European Union.

Defending the motion was Gawain Towler, UKIP's head of press since 2002 and York alumnus.

Attacking the motion was Edward McMillan-Scott, an MEP for North Yorkshire from 1984-2014, Vice-President of the European Commission, former Tory and current Lib Dem.

Towler began the debate with an interesting anecdote. He mentioned that as chairman of the York Tories, he had met McMillan-Scott at a Conservative spring conference in the early nineties, shortly after the adoption of the Treaty of Maastricht. This treaty, effective in 1993, is what created the formal European Union and paved the way for the adoption of the Euro. Towler argued that the Treaty of Maastricht marked the point where the EU ceased to be a collection of equal member states and began the trend – in his view – towards greater centralisation of power in the European Commission. He pointed out that the word 'irrevocably' occurred sixteen times in the wording of the treaty, and argued that the Tory MPs of the time simply didn't care about the country. Towler continued, stating that he had asked McMillan-Scott about the treaty and was given the reply "Oh, but they don't mean it."

McMillan-Scott pointed out that the treaty itself can be overturned – Parliament can simply overturn. He defended the EU by making the case that it had ensured peace and stability in Europe by providing a framework through which member states could work together and diplomatically. The positive, democratic EU was contrasted with the lingering threat of Russia; Merkel, he argued, was standing up to Putin, and this would be impossible were it not for the collective militaries of the EU member states. In

keeping with this, McMillan-Scott pointed out that last week was the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The EU, to the East Germans, represented peace, stability and prosperity. It would therefore be ludicrous – he asserted – to want to withdraw from such a union. We represent less than 1% of the world’s population and less than 3% of its GDP; the message here was that we were better off as part of the EU, not alone.

In terms of international trade, McMillan-Scott argued that we had much stronger ties with Europe than any other area of the world. The EU represents a market with 500,000,000 consumers; why on earth would we want to cut ourselves off from that? In addition, there doesn’t seem to be any reason why the EU member states would continue trading freely with us were we to leave. This would hit us hard; we have more trade with Belgium than India.

Towler regarded this last point as “tragic”; in his view we needed free trade agreements with developing countries. India and China between them represent over two billion people, and he asserted it was ludicrous not to want free trade deals with these markets. In addition, Canada and Australia speak English and have a similar culture to us, surely it makes sense for us to trade with them rather than the continent.

With regards to sovereignty, Towler argued that to accept the European Arrest Warrant was to sacrifice our sovereignty, and that in doing so we were plainly ignoring the rule of law, the burden of proof and all other basic legal concepts. Such a law plainly removes our sovereignty and places it in the hands of the European Commission.

McMillan-Scott countered by saying that we have more to gain from being within the Arrest Warrant, and that if we want to see the system improved, we can only do it from within. He also pointed out that since July alone we have refused 21 applications for extradition, hence our hands are not tied. He did, however, say that this was part of “standardisation of the law across the EU”, perhaps making Towler’s case for him; that Britain is ceding its sovereignty to the European Commission.

Defending the motion on the grounds of immigration, McMillan-Scott argued that immigration from Europe was not a major problem. He argued that there were “plenty of Brits living abroad”, and pointed to a recent UCL study demonstrating that, in economic terms, immigrants have been a major bonus to this country, contributing far more than they cost the economy. However, he did argue that we lack “proper controls”, though dismissed this as a non-issue. Closing, McMillan-Scott argued that immigration within the EU was not an issue as the EU countries are rich, industrialised, and can support new workers.

Predictably, Towler disagreed. He argued instead that British expats are retirees who go abroad to spend their money – his own father lives in northern France – whereas immigrants to Britain are generally younger people looking to make their fortune. Referencing the study, he argued that the long-term costs are still unknown, as the immigrants who came in the early 2000s are now entering the middle of their economic lives, where their children are entering school and they themselves are using more of the NHS. Another point he made against the study was that it only tracked economic costs and benefits, not the social consequences of large-scale immigration. He did, however, dismiss the notion that immigrants are coming here to take advantage of our welfare system; “the amount of benefits spent on immigrants is peanuts”.

In closing, both McMillan-Scott and Towler presented convincing arguments of a high standard. With this being said, both before the debate began and after its conclusion, those disagreeing with the motion outnumbered those agreeing by a 2:1 margin. In fact, once the debate had concluded, the results were even more decisive. However convincing the anti-EU arguments may have been, McMillan-Scott had the clear lead from the start, and held the crowd throughout.

Ciaran interviewed both guest speakers before the debate began. You can read Towler’s interview [here](#) and McMillan-Scott’s interview [here](#).



One comment

Edward McMillan-Scott (Semper vigilans)

1 Dec '14 at 10:44 pm

A good and comprehensive report: however, one important element was that the initial 'pro-EU' soundings were 67-37; the final vote was 84-22.

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