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Asking the right questions about Europe.

Rita Marcella

The European Debate – do we know the right questions to ask?

For the majority of my adult life, the United Kingdom has formed a part of the European Union. And although it has occasioned over those years some negativity – often of an “EU rules on the shape of bananas” nature – there has been almost no ill feeling or tension as a result of that membership. Aspects of EU interference, via the Common Agricultural Policy or fishing regulations or the European Convention on Human Rights have become part of our sense of how and where Europe influences the UK. But often we, the general public, are unclear how and in what ways precisely such matters impact on our own day to day lives.

We know that there have been some trade benefits from being part of a larger than national boundaries trading block, able as citizens to move goods and monies without restrictions, taxation or duties – but we are not necessarily clear how that might benefit us collectively as a nation.

We know that we can live and work in other parts of the European Union freely and without restriction on our capacity to be a part of that community. This is a right that Britons in their thousands have exercised in escape to the sun – and yet these are the same rights that have caused resentment in some of our population witnessing waves in immigration without understanding the benefits that accrue to the nation and our economy from immigration and only seeing the costs.

The establishment of a European community began in the aftermath of World War II with attempts to bring together the nations of Europe in friendly and collaborative economic activity to benefit society and prepare future leaders to work together for mutual benefit.

Over the years the institution has evolved from a focus on coal and steel though collaborative development into the far wider focus of the European Union today and an ever growing number of nation states as members.

Overall, those against worry about the effect of that widening and the extent to which both greater regulation of every aspect of life has increased bureaucracy and has decreased self determination for member states, the extent to which extension of the union has included member states of greater dependency and the risks that accrue from linking a nation’s own economic and social health too closely to that of others.

We have as a nation successfully resisted some abnegation of rights by, for example, not adopting the Euro – sometimes a benefit, sometimes a challenge. And we are still in a situation where the option to negotiate and secure continuing membership on our own terms is open to us.

And so here we are in Scotland faced for a second time with a referendum and a chance to voice our views about whether to continue as members of the European Union or to exit. And as with our most recent independence referendum, uncertainty amongst the public not only about which way to vote but about what would be the

consequences of that vote – staying and leaving. And as previously we are in a position where there is no absolute answer to the questions we might ask. For ultimately there is no right or wrong answer and simply no way of knowing whether the UK would be better to stay or go.

What are the questions we should ask?

Would we be economically better off if we stay? Would we be more in control of our own national destiny? Would we be better educated? Would our health services be better? Would we be safer? Would we have better control of our borders? Would our children have a better future?

There are, as I've said, no absolute and factual answers to these questions and that's what makes the decision more difficult. If we look at education, for example, while education policy is set and delivered at a national and devolved level, it is still influenced by the European context in a variety of ways. Scottish pupils and students earn qualifications for which there is across Europe an agreed mechanism for acceptance of credits and their transfer and these systems are well embedded in practice.

Scottish students can apply to and win places and funding in universities across Europe, while their peers from European universities can choose to come and study at Scottish universities.

Students across Europe are supported by European grants to spend some time studying abroad in recognition of the great value that accrues to society from encouragement of interchange and intercultural engagement and experience between students at the universities of Europe. Fifteen years ago we had fewer than 20 Aberdeen Business School students spending a period studying abroad – today we have two hundred.

And so although higher education is not governed by the European Union, Scottish universities benefit from many of the policies and funds of the European Union to encourage the free movement of students and academics from the universities of every member state.

Over many years I have conducted research into the information needs of UK citizens in terms of the European Union. It is a fact that most members of the UK public know far less about their European representation than they do about their local authority, about Holyrood and about Westminster: it is also the case that they typically feel far less interested in the European Union.

Indeed they found it difficult often to know why they should be interested in the EU nor how the EU might impact on their lives. As a result it may be that turnout for this referendum will be relatively low which is a pity because this referendum is asking of the UK public a very important question.

It would be a great pity if indeed the turnout is low: this may be one of those seminal moments – like the independence referendum, where we have the opportunity to have our say on a decision that will affect the lives of future generations. We are all European citizens and we have lived over the last 70 years through some of the safest and most stable of times as citizens of the European Union.