

Notes of a speech by Rt Hon Charles Kennedy MP, president of the European Movement, at the AGM, 12 September 2009

I have been trying to use the vantage space of the Commons to get the existence of the European Movement on to the public record. The prime minister has said something specific and positive about the role of the European Movement in British politics, but he has not offered any more concrete help than that.

Part of our task has to be rebuilding the membership base. The onus is on the European Movement to rebuild and remake the case. We ask ourselves: why can't we get more coverage in the media? Why can't the coverage we do get be more positive?

They say that words shouldn't hurt you, but words do matter in political discourse. One of the things that has dismayed me is the use of vocabulary in political argument. I have argued this with the government privately and publicly, but they don't seem to get it.

If I am trying to sell Coca-Cola, I don't do it by telling you all the bad things about Pepsi. When it comes to Europe, you don't sell hope and trust in the idea by telling people all about the bad things you are saving them from. Take David Miliband's speech at the Labour conference last year. He criticised the Conservatives for their opposition to the Lisbon treaty, and told everyone that they could rely on a Labour government to protect them from all the bad things that might flow from it. That doesn't do the pro-European argument any good whatsoever.

And it's not just that people choose the wrong tone or vocabulary. There is also a conspiracy of silence over the issue altogether. For example, in the general election in 2005, the future of civil nuclear power and the issue of Europe were never discussed. How does this come about?

I must confess that I was guilty of this too. Party experts advised keeping quiet on my pro-Europeanism. What a mistake.

Actually, taking a stance that might be unpopular with a lot of people, perhaps even a majority of people, can prove not to be damaging because people will think to themselves: I might disagree with his viewpoint but at least he is saying what he thinks. You can generate respect for being genuine and sincere. That is a valuable commodity in politics, and something for all of us in our own parties to think about.

Now, I want to propose something for the European Movement to work on. I know that Peter and Brendan were keen for this to happen during the European elections, but it didn't transpire. Let's think about if there are televised leadership debates during the next general election campaign. If there are to be such debates, and it is looking more likely now than in the past, we've got a real task to do, to make sure that the European issue feature prominently in those debates. Put party leaders on the spot to make them reveal their hand on the European issue.

People can see instinctively that environmental issues need to be coordinated at European level. Europe has got to have a role in that. Such was the scale of the calamity in banking and finance, there is recognition that there has to be international cooperation here too. That should be a source of encouragement.

The election will be very much coloured by the experience of the recession and the crisis. Britain must be seeking to influence the decisions taken in Europe. This my first point.

My second point is that I would like to be optimistic: who knows what David Cameron's real view of Europe is. But William Hague has allowed Britain's marginalisation to increase in the European Parliament in a way that is in none of our interests, and if that is repeated in government that will be even worse.

The more sceptical the Tories are in government, perhaps the more pro-European Labour will become in opposition. This reminds of the period when John Smith was Labour leader. Europe could provide the beginnings of a big comfort blanket for Labour in opposition. I find it hard to believe that Labour will instead repeat its experience of outright opposition to membership (this is the moment when I left the Labour party myself).

Thirdly, there is the issue of economic nationalism, which I fear will rear its ugly head again. It was a terrible mistake to raise this, with the phrase "British jobs for British workers". We have to defend the idea of free trade and free movement.

My fourth suggestion is that, with the devolved assemblies now taking on more responsibility for domestic issues, there should be a lot more time for scrutiny and debate of European legislation at Westminster. This would be a positive parliamentary reform and would get a lot more of the European argument out in the open.

Finally, let me say that I think that the British attitude to Europe was summed up perfectly by a Swiss businessman who was living in the UK and who talked about the experience and habits of his British colleagues. He had no particular political axe to grind, just everyday experience of how we live.

And he said that his colleagues would, at the end of a long working week, get in their German or Japanese cars to drive home. On the way, they would ring their husbands or wives on their Finnish or Swedish mobile phones, and discuss their plans for dinner. Then, as they neared home, they would stop off and get a takeaway, Chinese or Indian perhaps, or a pizza from Italy, and a nice bottle of wine from France or Spain. Then, at home with the family, they would settle down to enjoy dinner while watching the latest Hollywood film from America on their Chinese-made DVD player.

And when the Swiss businessman asked his colleagues about what characterised their experience of being British, they would say it was at heart a mistrust of anything foreign.