

Speech by Barry Legg, Chairman of the Bruges Group, at the **20th Anniversary of the Maastricht Rebellion Dinner**

Ladies and gentleman, fellow opponents of the Maastricht Treaty.

It is now 20 years, since we tried to save Europe from the catastrophe that is now unfolding. We failed in that endeavour, but we did succeed in setting in train a process, which saved our currency and turned the people away from ever closer union.

When I sent out invitations to this dinner, I received the following reply from Sir Peter Tapsell, the Father of the House of Commons.

It read 'I have always regarded my part in the opposition to the Maastricht Treaty as being the thing of which I am most proud in the course of my 53 years of Parliamentary service.'

Peter, none of us, can match your record of Parliamentary service, but all of us can agree with those sentiments.

Those of us that oppose Maastricht did hold some widely differing views and none of us were easily subject to persuasion. But in this matter we had one thing in common. We simply knew that in making our decision, we had to put our country first.

To be driven by an abstract concept is not something that many people find easy and I believe that it is no coincidence that the forebears of many of the Maastricht rebels had served their country in its hour of greatest need, and indeed some had made the ultimate sacrifice.

When I was elected to Parliament in April 1992 I fulfilled a long standing ambition, but my overwhelming emotion when I came to Westminster was one of foreboding. I knew that our membership of the ERM was a ticking time-bomb and that the Maastricht Treaty would put me at odds with my own government.

In my maiden speech, I argued that we must be free to set our own interest rates and, of course, that could only be done outside the ERM. But, over the following months both Chancellor and Prime Minister declared that there was not a scintilla of doubt that Sterling would remain in the ERM. On the 16th September 1992 the inevitable happened the markets terminated Britain's membership of the ERM. It was great news for the economy but it was disastrous news for the Conservative Party. Its reputation for economic competence, which had prevailed for 40 years, was destroyed. Our standing in the opinion polls plummeted and never recovered. But not even this disaster could dissuade our government from pressing on with Maastricht.

Many on the Conservative benches shared our views but ultimately were not prepared to act. In June 1992 we sponsored the Fresh Start Motion, which in the wake of the Danish referendum, called for the abandonment of Maastricht and the advancement of the ideas contained in the Bruges Speech.

Some 80 Conservative back bench MPs, around half of those eligible, signed the motion. But four months later on the 4th November only 26 of us remained, who were

prepared to act upon our convictions. It was not quite enough, we fell short by three votes. Maastricht was to proceed and the opportunity to make a fresh start was lost.

Peter Tapsell, in his opposition to Maastricht was able to draw upon his experiences dating back to the 1930s. You Peter, I, and many others quite rightly compared the proposed Single Currency to the Gold Standard and saw that it had the capacity to bring forth economic depression. How right we were.

Peter, you even recounted to the House of Commons a conversation which you had with Winston Churchill, late in his life, when he told you that his biggest political mistake was to return to the Gold Standard – a bigger mistake even than the Dardanelles. Peter, you also told the House of Commons that one of your earliest memories as a boy was of standing in a dole queue with your Father and remembering the humiliation that he felt in being in that dole queue. What you saw and experienced in the 1930s is now being played out across Europe in Greece, in Spain, in Portugal and elsewhere. Indeed, the economic consequences in some areas are now even more extreme than in the 1930s. A quarter of Greece's economy has been wiped out by this lunacy. The peoples of Southern Europe are suffering extreme economic deprivation and when all of the conventional parties offer the same failed prescription, extremist parties start to flourish.

Ladies and gentlemen, at the time people even called us Little Englanders, but the truth is that we believed that this Treaty was not just bad for Britain, but bad for Europe as a whole.

We planned to fight the Treaty line by line. We had to get across to the British people the profound nature of the changes that were proposed.

John Major, like another British Prime Minister fifty years earlier, claimed a diplomatic triumph when he returned from Maastricht. He used the words "Game, Set and Match". But in reality, European government had been set in train and now a future British government led by a Tony Blair or a Michael Heseltine could merely decide to abolish Sterling and join the euro.

In due course, our prolonged Parliamentary opposition meant that the future of the Pound had become such a crucial issue that both major parties conceded a referendum. In my mind the currency was then safe. I trusted the British people.

If a British government had been able to give up Sterling our country would have been ruined. As happened in Ireland, we would have experienced a mighty boom, to be followed by the mother and father of all busts.

Many Conservative MPs told me that if they believed that the Single Currency could really happen they would join me in opposing the Treaty. Indeed, the Prime Minister of the day encouraged the notion that it would never happen. A similar misjudgement to that of a Prime Minister fifty years earlier. Whereas it is possible to accept this argument at second hand, it is difficult to understand how those who held the highest offices and had regular contacts with the European elite could fail to appreciate their steely determination to implement their plans. Yes, Maastricht left out many necessary details of the Single Currency and European government, but that was not because the plan was not to be implemented, it was because the architects did not wish to show their hand in full. If, the Treaty had properly included, say provisions

dealing with banking union that would have frightened the horses and the project would have fallen there and then.

20 years ago some of us who opposed Maastricht said that instead of adopting this approach, powers should be repatriated to individual states. Essentially, we were adopting the vision set out in Margaret Thatcher's Bruges Speech. But if we are honest, we should now accept that Bruges was destroyed by Maastricht. Maastricht was the blue print for European government to be achieved through the mechanism of one currency. Today Europe's leaders pursue that agenda. More Europe is still their answer.

Since Maastricht, more and more powers have been transferred culminating in the European Constitution. The argument that a limited repatriation of powers is the solution is now redundant.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is now abundantly clear that we would be better off out. And how much better off would we be? Well, Tim Congdon, one of this country's finest economists has the answer. Its £150 billion per year. We should not stay in the European Union, if we wish our country and its people to achieve their full potential. More Europe is the agenda of the elite if we stay, we will be in the same position as Norway. The 17 states who share one currency would decide our future.

Many of our current leaders sing the praises of the Single Market, but the so-called Single Market is a highly regulated market. Free trade is better than the Single Market. Indeed, being subject to so many regulations can impede our trade with the rest of the world. That is one of the reasons that we do less trade with China and India combined than we do with austerity ravaged Ireland.

Half of the £150 billion annual cost of our EU membership is due to excessive regulation. We now need to heed Peel, Gladstone and Churchill and embrace free trade. We do not need the straight jacket of EU membership. Instead, like many countries around the world, we should negotiate a free trade agreement and let us not forget that more than ever Europe itself needs free access to our markets.

Under the misguided and defeatist leadership of Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath, our global vision was impaired.

Let us never forget the words of Sir Winston Churchill to the House of Commons on 13th May 1953;

*"We are with Europe but not of it.
We are linked but not compromised.
We are associated but not absorbed.
If Britain must choose between Europe
and the open sea. She must always choose
the open sea."*