

HOUSE OF LORDS  
MINUTES OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN BEFORE  
THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION

**REFERENDUMS INQUIRY**

WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY 2010

MR STEVE RICHARDS

Evidence heard in Public

Questions 120 - 155

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WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY 2010

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Present

Goodlad, L (Chairman)  
Hart of Chilton, L  
Irvine of Lairg, L  
Jay of Paddington, B  
Norton of Louth, L  
Pannick, L  
Quin, B  
Rodgers of Quarry Bank, L  
Shaw of Northstead, L  
Wallace of Tankerness, L  
Woolf, L

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Witness: **Mr Steve Richards**, Chief Political Commentator, *The Independent*, examined.

**Q120 Chairman:** Mr Richards, good morning.

**Mr Richards:** Good morning.

**Q121 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed for joining the Committee and welcome. We are being sound recorded so could I ask you, please, if you would be so kind as to identify yourself for the record, and if you want to make a preliminary brief statement, please do so, otherwise we will go straight into the discussion.

**Mr Richards:** I am Steve Richards, Chief Political Commentator of *The Independent* and presenter of the *Week in Westminster* on Radio 4.

**Q122 Chairman:** Thank you very much. Could I begin by asking how you see the strengths and weaknesses of referendums as part of the political process and their compatibility with parliamentary democracy?

**Mr Richards:** I am deeply sceptical about referendums in terms of their compatibility with parliamentary democracy, but also as someone who has watched closely how referendums

have been used over recent years. It seems to me that because, actually, referendums are not deeply embedded in our political culture – for good reasons – they are the equivalent for political leaders of a sort of *film noir* character. They are very attractive to offer, but actually to hold them they come back and become a real problem and almost kill you, and therefore they are not often held. I have written so many commentaries on offers of referendums which get political leaders out of a hole – it is a way of postponing awkward decisions – and then quite often they are not held. If you look actually at the build-up to Labour's manifesto in 1997, the manifesto was almost like a halfway bridge to power and then a lot of the awkward decisions and debates took the form of promises of referendums – the euro, Scottish Parliament, London mayors, electoral reform. Some of them were subsequently held but a couple of the big ones never were. Similarly with the euro, the debate really is postponed on both sides by this device of a referendum. In terms of its compatibility with Parliament, there are real issues there; I sort of take the Ken Clarke view that on some of these issues of real complexity Parliament is better placed to make these decisions than a referendum. There is a third issue which obviously I would like to talk about, because this is an area where I can offer a degree of expertise – and in some areas I cannot – the British media is not necessarily the most reliable institution to mediate on the complexities of some of these issues and they will be determined by the British media. Those are the reasons why, for all the attractions – and of course I understand those arguments as well – I am very sceptical about the extensive use of referendums in Britain.

**Chairman:** Thank you. Lord Shaw.

**Q123 Lord Shaw of Northstead:** That really comes on to what puzzles me, which is should a referendum be regarded as a tool of the parliamentary process or should it be regarded as being independent, perhaps even above the parliamentary process?

**Mr Richards:** That is interesting, because at the moment I do not think it is either of those two things. It is certainly not above the parliamentary process in the sense that any referendum would be instigated by the government who would then have to get it through Parliament, but nor is it a tool of the parliamentary process because all the evidence that I see is that it undermines the parliamentary process, to the point where – certainly, say, in the first term of the Labour Government and arguably even the final phase of the Major years – there could well have been a majority in the House of Commons for the euro actually at certain points, but they would never have won a referendum. Who prevails under those circumstances? The answer is, of course, a leader does not dare hold a referendum unless they are convinced they are going to win it, so they are tools for leaders to avoid decisions; I do not think they are a tool for Parliament.

**Q124 Lord Shaw of Northstead:** In themselves they do not indicate which type of potential legislation should come forward and which should not, they are really to deal with the state of the Government and whether they think it will go through.

**Mr Richards:** I think so.

**Q125 Baroness Jay of Paddington:** You have covered some of these points but we have had some discussion with previous witnesses about the experience of the 1975 referendum and whether that was not merely a tool as it were for government but a tool for internal party political purposes to unite the Labour Party or get a Labour Party position. To what extent do you think you can see across the board – because we have only got that one experience in this country – that kind of attitude to referendums by governments? I suppose the second question on that is do you think that if there is a referendum, for whatever purpose and with whatever intent, the Government should then be necessarily bound by the result?

**Mr Richards:** On the first point it seems to me to be absolutely clear that referendums on the whole are a device for keeping a party together, of which the 1975 one is absolutely vivid. In fact there is a quote from your father about Tony Benn's initiative for a referendum. Jim Callaghan said "Tony Benn has given us a life raft on which we can all climb aboard". That was the proposal to hold a referendum. The other interesting thing is clearly, yes, it must be binding on a government. If a government holds the thing it cannot then disown the result, it would create a massive crisis, but what is interesting if you look at that 1975 experience is how its binding nature was so time-limited, so by 1983 the Labour Party, who in government held the referendum and actually sort of campaigned for a yes vote – or at least its leadership did, the Cabinet of course was famously split – were calling for the withdrawal of Britain from the Common Market. The referendum on Labour, therefore, was binding for about four years and then they wanted to change it, and there is an issue of how long a referendum can be seen as being the authoritative position because you could argue that the electorate in 1975 was very different to the electorate in 1995. There is therefore a real issue about how authoritative that verdict is when a referendum is held; it is another of the problems with it.

**Q126 Baroness Jay of Paddington:** If I may just have a quick supplementary, that is obviously relevant when you talk, for example, about the potential for a referendum on the euro or, for example, the whole discussion that has been going on about the Lisbon Treaty.

**Mr Richards:** Yes.

**Q127 Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Although you are adamant that the Government would have to abide by it at the beginning, would you say there is enormous room to manoeuvre, particularly around international obligations?

**Mr Richards:** Absolutely. If the European constitution had gone ahead as planned and Britain had held a referendum, and by some extraordinary twist there had been a yes vote, by

now that would be being called into question and many Conservatives and others would be saying “That was then, we know a lot more about it now, it clearly is not working, we need to revisit this.” The interesting one obviously in the near future is this commitment to hold a referendum on electoral reform again because that would have to produce a sequence that happens very quickly. If you have got a referendum in favour of changing the voting system you would have to change the voting system, and that would be a lasting measure, but on Europe it seems to me these referendums are absolutely time-limited and people change their minds on the principle of referendums depending on whether they think they are going to win them or not. For example, Tony Benn was the advocate in the early Seventies; I remember when, after the huge yes vote in 1975, he said “Well, it is clear referendums are not of any use in Britain, the media is too biased” and all the rest of it, and then he became an ardent supporter of one when it looked as if there was going to be one on the euro and his side would win. That is an example of the sort of fickle way people view referendums.

**Q128 Baroness Quin:** I have to say I have a lot of sympathy with your view about the fickleness which surrounds this debate, but you started off by stressing the role of governments in calling referendums and yet the example, the 1975 one, as both you and Lady Jay said, was actually much more instigated by a particular voice and faction within the Labour Party at that time. I just wondered if referendums are to be part of our system what rules do you think should obtain in determining how a referendum should be called, should it be the government, should it be some other formula. Similarly, to pick up your point on timing, the 1975 referendum put the issue to bed for quite a long time and yet you have had, as you have correctly pointed out, the European referendums where you have one referendum and then you have another one less than a year later to change it. Again, if referendums are part of the system do you have any view as to what kind of timing is acceptable between the same consideration of the same issue?

**Mr Richards:** Implicit in the question are real concerns about the whole extensive use of referendums because, to go to the first part first, while there are obvious problems in the Government alone being able to trigger referendums for the reason we have discussed, I cannot see any other legitimate device because presumably the Government would have a majority in the House of Commons and any referendum bill would have to be passed by the House of Commons. It is quite hard to see from which other source the trigger comes. I know there are people campaigning for citizens in various institutional arrangements to be able to somehow or other trigger local referendums and in some cases national referendums. I do not quite see how the mechanics of that work and so I think the reality will be that certainly at a national level – I can see the case for local referendums being slightly different – inevitably it will have to come from the Government (assuming they have a majority in the House of Commons). In terms of the timing of it, this again is a problem. When a referendum is held both sides during the campaign say the decision is binding, and I remember that was the line on the 1975 referendum. Just the dynamics of politics will mean that that is not the case, whether in principle you think it should be or not, so my personal view is that it is inevitably time-limited and the issues will be revisited very quickly. That is one of the reasons why people need to think very carefully about it. Even in Scotland where the referendum very quickly brought about the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, as everyone here knows better than me the debate about the powers, the independence, none of it has gone away and in some ways it has intensified. Even where a referendum produces the concrete tangible change that a yes vote is meant to bring about I still do not think the arguments are resolved there, ever, in these areas.

**Q129 Lord Woolf:** You have indicated your scepticism and perhaps you have already illustrated some reasons for the scepticism, and you mentioned to us the position with regard to the Scottish Parliament a moment ago. So far as the referendums that have been held in the

UK are concerned, are there any examples you would cite as saying “I remain sceptical but they have worked well and they are a positive in this particular context”?

**Mr Richards:** To be honest there are two parts. There is a case for saying that the devolution referendums were necessary, that they brought about a change which was so profound it required a degree of legitimacy beyond a general election campaign, which was Labour’s original intention before Tony Blair changed it, but, incidentally, the only reason why that change came about was quite interesting. Blair in about 1996 took a week off and looked through every Labour policy to see how it would stand up under scrutiny during an election campaign, and he noticed that they were calling for a referendum on the euro on the grounds that it was a constitutional change and they were not offering one in Scotland on those grounds. He did not think he could go through an election campaign with that contradiction, so he came back and said “We are going to offer a referendum in Scotland”. It caused mayhem at the time in the Scottish Labour Party but it was not that he thought out of principle we must do this; he was worried about the contradictions in a Labour election campaign. But there is an argument that for the Welsh Assembly, for the Scottish Parliament it needed the degree of legitimacy that a direct vote brought about, so I accept that there are cases where it might be necessary to hold them. I do not think they achieve any of their pure stated aims of ending the argument, of being a noble consultation of the people, the politicians stepping back and letting the people decide, I do not think it does any of those things in any of them, but I can see occasions where the constitutional change is so big it is necessary to hold them.

**Q130 Lord Wallace of Tankerness:** Can I follow on from the Scottish experience in 1996/1997 in which I had some involvement? From our perspective, as a non-Labour party, there were two questions in the referendum, the second one being the tax question, and certainly those of us who were sceptical about the change of policy thought that actually to



put a tax question into a referendum neutralised it during the election campaign and I just wondered if you have any insight as to whether that hunch on our part was right.

*Mr Richards:* Completely, yes – neutralised it as a problem for Labour you mean.

**Q131 Lord Wallace of Tankerness:** Yes.

*Mr Richards:* Yes, absolutely. Referendums are held by leaders to get them through an awkward situation it seems to me. It looks as if they are being rather noble in giving powers away from themselves to take decisions and giving them to the voters to do it. The motives for holding them are far more complicated than that.

**Q132 Lord Norton of Louth:** Two questions, the first is simply process rather than principle. Parliament has sought to anticipate that if there is a referendum there should be certain rules that govern it so we have got the 2000 Act, the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act. Do you have any view on that; is it likely to be effective and does it have much impact from the point of view of broadcasters?

*Mr Richards:* Broadcasters are already very constrained actually. As far as I know, and I am not completely up to speed on this, the rules governing broadcasters during referendums are almost as strict as during general election campaigns. However, managing the referendum campaign from a broadcaster's perspective is much more complicated than in an election campaign. The referendum dimension of the 2000 Act was drawn up in the anticipation that there would be a referendum on the euro. All I know is that there was a heck of a lot of behind the scenes manoeuvring – Gordon Brown reading every single word of it, speaking to Jack Straw and saying “We cannot do this, this means we are completely bugged on the euro referendum”, and so I would be wary as to whether that Act was put together as an objective means by which referendums are held in a sort of clear, clean way. In terms of the coverage of it the newspapers will play a big part as well now, and the blogosphere, and that

is more my worry about referendums than the broadcasters who are so constrained in these campaigns.

**Q133 Lord Norton of Louth:** The Act may need to be revisited but there is no way you are going to be able to control the changes that you just mentioned.

*Mr Richards:* The Act will need to be revisited and it needs to be revisited away from the feverish context in which it was put together, which was very much on the assumption that a referendum on the euro would be held. The media climate has changed so much since then and the media in the end will mediate; most people will not watch a referendum campaign in the raw. A few of us will, we will be hooked on it, but on the whole it will be done through the media and I do not, on some of these issues, have great faith in a balanced view coming across.

**Q134 Lord Norton of Louth:** You have touched upon the fact that something like the blogosphere is going to be very difficult to have regulation of anyway and that is an unmediated contact.

*Mr Richards:* Yes, and increasingly influential. It will play quite a big part in the coming general election and – this is a different issue in some respects but not entirely – it is having a very big impact on the orthodox media as well. For a referendum campaign on an issue as complex as joining the single currency, and for it to be mediated by some of these blogs and so on, I have some worries about.

**Q135 Lord Norton of Louth:** Moving on to the second question, Lady Quin has already mentioned the experience elsewhere where a regime may have a referendum and not get the result it wants and then hold a second one. If we are looking at overseas experience, where

the Committee has taken at least some evidence, do you have any views on that? Is there anything we should learn from overseas experience?

**Mr Richards:** I am afraid, again, they reinforce my doubts in virtually every case. It was very interesting watching, from a distance in my case, for example the French referendum on Maastricht. From all I read it was partly about Maastricht but quite a lot about the verdict on Mitterrand at the time. The Irish referendum was a whole series of motives and, as you say, anyway they held it again, so on the question about time limits it was there about three months or whatever. I have not seen many which lead me to suggest these are what they on the surface appear to be: instruments to enhance the democratic process and engage people. I know now there is a very strong argument coming from some people that the disillusionment with politics is so great that one way of addressing it is to have more referendums so that people feel more engaged and so on. Because of all the problems I do not buy that argument, but I can understand it. I cannot think of one foreign referendum of recent years which makes me challenge some of the things I have been arguing actually.

**Q136 Lord Norton of Louth:** I was just thinking if one looks elsewhere – and I agree with what you are arguing – if one was going to have a referendum, because you have conceded that in certain circumstances there may be a referendum, is there anything we can learn from elsewhere that might render it less bad, perhaps in terms of process, than otherwise would be the case?

**Mr Richards:** I suppose there is an argument for saying – although I hesitate – that in certain circumstances if there is a rule in place that triggers a referendum irrespective of the short term political considerations of any of the parties, that at least establishes a degree of neutrality. I personally would not argue it – for example in Ireland there has to be a referendum on every big treaty change – but I can see how that to some extent depoliticises the context in which they are held and that addresses one of my concerns. That is one thing

that maybe, if it is established clearly and not just out of convention that on major constitutional matters there must be a referendum, and you define very clearly what those constitutional matters are, addresses some of the sorts of problems that we have in Britain where it is sometimes used, but not always, as a way of offering a referendum which then sometimes is not held anyway. I can see that there might be a case for that in certain circumstances.

**Q137 Baroness Quin:** You have partly touched on what I was going to ask but it does relate to the quality of information that people are given during the course of a referendum campaign. I wondered what your thoughts were, if referendums are being held, as to what best ways there are of making sure that the public is as well informed as possible and what role government should or could play in that process.

**Mr Richards:** There is another side to the developments in the media since 2000 which is that while actually a referendum campaign on just about anything would be more raucous and less enlightening on the whole because of the changes in the media, there is now, because newspapers have less of a monopoly of media opinion than they used to have, a chance for diverse voices to be heard. If there was one even on Europe now – although most of the problem bloggers in Britain are eurosceptic – there would be ways in which arguments could be heard that were not the case ten years ago. That is one thing. Because I come at it, I am afraid, with such wariness I cannot think of ways in which the Government can directly assist matters and in fact the more they try to do so the more that might fuel suspicion actually. The problem is that when you have a referendum almost certainly the Government will take a view one way or another, not just on the desirability of holding a referendum but on the outcome, so when that is the case the Government clearly will go out there and put the argument, but it cannot at the same time be the regulator of the process without fuelling the already existing cynicism. For example, say Labour were to win – and we are leaping about

eight hurdles here – and they were to have a referendum on the alternative vote and campaigned in favour of it, there is a strong case for saying – although actually this was one of the things that Brown, Straw and Blair got very worked up about in 2000 – that the Government should not set the question of the referendum because if they are taking a view on what they want the outcome to be they should be well out of setting the question. I know that when they thought they were going to have one on the euro they were all very worked up about not being able to control the question, but that is a big control to have and I do not think the Government should have that control.

**Q138 Baroness Quin:** Are there some subjects that you think are particularly unsuitable for referendums, perhaps because of their innate complexity or for some other reason?

**Mr Richards:** You will not be surprised to hear I do, yes. It is very difficult when you have got something like the single currency because it is a huge move and maybe it is one of those where it is necessary, given the level of controversy and the degree to which things will change as a result, that you do have to hold one. But I do worry that if it is an issue of such complexity actually the arguments will get completely lost and the technical detail will not be followed for totally understandable reasons. Ken Clarke has said this is one of the reasons why you put elected representatives into the House of Commons, and it seems to me the wrong thing to just transfer all this power into a referendum campaign. I do think that some of these really complex economic issues are completely wrong for a referendum campaign but I totally understand, in the current culture of mistrust, why people find it necessary to do it and inevitably there will be a referendum on that issue if it ever comes up in the next 50 years. I can see exactly what form the campaign will take and it is quite interesting, looking back at the 1975 campaign, quite a lot of the issues actually did not surface in much detail at the time and the euro referendum will be if we go in tomorrow we lose all power over everything and

prices will go up by £100 when you go shopping. That will be the way it will be fought I suspect. It also depends on who is in power at the time.

**Q139 Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Picking up your point which you have mentioned twice just now about the disillusion and culture – I cannot remember the phrase you used but we all know what we are talking about, which is that in this environment where the political process seems both unattractive and very distant to an enormous number of people, you have indicated that you might be less sceptical about a local referendum, and in this Committee we have heard evidence about various citizens' initiatives which you have touched on. Do you see any legitimate role for the bloggers, the citizen's local agitator, to use that tool much more productively on issues which are of immediate relevance in a neighbourhood for example?

**Mr Richards:** I do actually. I cannot see the same set of problems arising. I remember when David Miliband was briefly Communities Minister he was proposing that people living in a community, on an estate or something, could have the power to trigger some kind of poll over the quality of recreational provision or something and get something changed. That is quite interesting, though there are practical questions about it and in fact even there it is quite complicated. Someone was telling me that the Tories are going to propose that local referendums could be held – if the local housing estate wants to become responsible for their maintenance and cleaning and so on they should have the right to do that, but actually most local authorities have contracted that out and companies are on five-year contracts. These are really complicated things when you look at them in practical terms but local referendums seem sensible and a way of trying to get more interest.

**Q140 Baroness Jay of Paddington:** If you take the particular example of a Member of the Commons at the moment who campaigned on the single issue of the local hospital closure, would it perhaps be a more sensible way, if that is not an inappropriate word, of dealing with

those kinds of local issues and local campaigns than electing someone to the Commons on a particular local initiative?

**Mr Richards:** Completely. I am really sceptical of independent, single issue MPs coming to the House of Commons because the House of Commons has to consider a whole range of issues and it seems to me it would not be a healthy development if, as a result of the disillusion with mainstream politics, we get a load of these single interest MPs. It just seems to me completely at odds with what MPs are meant to be doing, and that is another way of dealing with it. However, there is always a problem because you could have a referendum on a single issue, but as you will know much better than me, because most of you have been in government at certain points, they nearly all interconnect with other things. If there is a hospital project and you have a referendum against a hospital closing, that probably does not address what do you then do if that one stays open and who decides that. There is a very interesting debate going on in the Conservative Party at the moment about devolving power to very local groups; they are calling it part of their post-bureaucratic age and they want to get money down to the lowest groups for them to decide themselves how to spend it on housing and all the rest of it. I went to one seminar where they were looking at all of this and someone said “Who decides how much money and how do you hold them to account for that money if it is taxpayers’ money?” By the end of the day they had created 10,000 bureaucrats to manage the purse, and it is the same sometimes with a referendum on a single issue in that it seems to address something but actually then produces another 10,000 problems. Local politics is so moribund, more so than national, that I can see it is a way of bringing it to life actually.

**Q141 Chairman:** If you have a referendum, for example on the closure of the local hospital, you are always going to get the answer “No” because it is going to be merged into a new

modern one 20 miles away or something like that. If people want to elect a local doctor to say “I stand up for our hospital”, surely they are free to do so, that is what democracy is about.

**Mr Richards:** If people want to do that, that is fine. I do not think it is a healthy development in general terms because it is not necessarily the best way actually for them to achieve their goal I suspect. This is a separate but slightly related issue; the decline in the support for the mainstream parties is, in my view, not a healthy development and, therefore, the subsequent soaring of these kinds of independent figures is not a good thing either.

**Q142 Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank:** It seems to me you are slipping away from your very strong and committed position and I am rather unclear, if I may say so. You suggested that people are disillusioned or unhappy, not content, that people are not engaged, can you really make a case on any issue to say in order to get people engaged let us have a referendum? The argument for what I call virtuous politics, encouraging young people to have an interest, let us have a referendum, that is a very dangerous way of moving. We have to judge the issue and the outcome not on simply behaviour.

**Mr Richards:** I completely agree with you. All I was saying is I could see the case locally for having these sometimes. On a national level I agree with you completely.

**Q143 Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank:** When you say you can see it, we can all see it.

**Mr Richards:** I am just trying not to appear totally sceptical.

**Q144 Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank:** I know you are.

**Mr Richards:** I am basically wholly sceptical of referendums so I am not being inconsistent. I am suspicious of them on every front including as a device to get people engaged. Locally I cannot see some of the problems I have talked about at a national level; that is what I am saying.



**Q145 Lord Pannick:** You told us earlier that one of the reasons for your suspicions about referendums is that the result will be determined by the media. Would you agree that despite the growth in popularity of internet sites, blogging, the print media remain enormously influential in this country?

*Mr Richards:* Yes.

**Q146 Lord Pannick:** Do you think, if we are to have further referendums, that legislation ought to impose some requirements on the print media to require them to give access to each side of the referendum campaign?

*Mr Richards:* You have just put another case against referendums really; just imagine what would happen if any attempt was made in that direction. Let me tell you the sequence: the Government is about to announce it is going to hold a referendum in which it wants a yes vote and at the same time announces moves to force newspapers to put the case. It is a sequence which in itself spells total doom on lots of levels, so that will not happen.

**Q147 Lord Pannick:** Politically or for practical reasons, it is just imposed.

*Mr Richards:* Both actually, but certainly politically. Any government that tried to do that would be slaughtered by the papers who would be quite influential in the campaign, but there would be practical problems as well. It is a serious issue; I do not think a referendum on anything to do with Europe, for example, will be fairly reported. It is a statement of the obvious, I think even the newspapers themselves would admit they would passionately put the case one way or the other, mainly one way, so that is one of the many problems with referendums.

**Q148 Lord Wallace of Tankerness:** You indicated earlier that there was consternation if there was a referendum on the euro as to who would frame the question.

*Mr Richards:* Yes.

**Q149 Lord Wallace of Tankerness:** If I could just perhaps broaden it out into a more general question, if there are to be referendums do you have any view as to how the question should be designed? It has been accepted that there have been one or two constitutional issues where there has been fundamental change and perhaps a referendum missed out on the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, possibly even if we were to go into the euro there maybe would be a case. What would be your view as to how the question in a future referendum should be framed?

*Mr Richards:* What, who should frame it?

**Q150 Lord Wallace of Tankerness:** Who should frame it?

*Mr Richards:* It is difficult, but it needs to be taken out of mainstream politics altogether and it should be framed by – I do not know, could the Electoral Commission do it? It needs to be a body outside those who will be taking part in the subsequent campaign and, as a result, you know, the Government instigating the referendum already loses a bit of control but it is important that it does.

**Q151 Lord Wallace of Tankerness:** It has been sometimes suggested in the Scottish context of independence, the status quo or the possibility of a multi-option referendum or does that make worse every reservation you have?

*Mr Richards:* Yes, it does, because one of the things has to be simplicity. You raise an interesting question because I am told by the people who study this that something which is seen as the less threatening option tends to be more popular. For example, in 1975 we were already in; should we stay in is less threatening, so the status quo can often seem more

reassuring and less threatening than if it is projected as change. The framing of it is therefore very, very important.

**Q152 Lord Norton of Louth:** If I could just add a postscript to that, there is evidence that if it is put in a yes/no form there is a slight tendency to favour the yes, which reinforces the point you are making.

**Mr Richards:** Absolutely.

**Q153 Lord Norton of Louth:** But the Electoral Commission tends to favour that rather than, say, two neutral statements, simply for reasons of campaigning – it is difficult to campaign unless you can say vote yes.

**Mr Richards:** Yes, that is another problem.

**Q154 Lord Shaw of Northstead:** One further point. I take all the points about complexities and so on – in certain cases anyway – but is there any case for the subject of a referendum to come before a House committee for general discussion and a process of parliamentary scrutiny before it goes out to the public?

**Mr Richards:** Yes, that would be useful because it would get a lot of reporting but I still do not think it addresses the sort of fundamental problems that I have raised.

**Q155 Chairman:** Mr Richards, thank you very much indeed for joining the Committee and indeed for the evidence you have given. We have covered a lot of ground and you have been most generous with your time; thank you very much indeed.

**Mr Richards:** Thank you very much.