

National roundup

Politics

Ashcroft back on Tory board

Lord Ashcroft, the controversial former Tory treasurer, has rejoined the Conservative Party Board to help the party through a financial crisis following the election.

The former tax exile became a hero among Tory candidates after he and two big donors, casino boss Lord Steinberg and a group of Midlands businessmen, bypassed Tory Central Office and gave £2m to target marginal seats in the campaign.

Some 25 of the 33 Tory candidates who won seats from Labour and Lib Dems were funded by the initiative, which had been rejected by party leader Michael Howard.

Each candidate had to produce a business plan and show he or she had no other major finances. Usually the funding was also targeted at seats where Labour had little chance of losing this time but which are now among marginals that could fall at the next election.

The party said yesterday: "In view of his outstanding contribution to the party's progress in winning target

seats Lord Ashcroft has been also been asked to join the board and has accepted."

Lord Ashcroft's rehabilitation comes as the party faces a multimillion pound bill after taking out huge commercial loans from high profile donors. The party is thought to owe as much as £15m after the campaign. The board will now ask the donors to defer repayments because it has little chance of raising new donations until a new leader has been elected. Lord Ashcroft is unlikely to press for the early repayment of the £1.5 million he is owed. *David Hencke*

Campaign aims to kick out treaty

The no campaign in Britain against the new EU constitution is to launch today, bringing together trade unionists and business in an attempt to show it is geared up to win a referendum and can draw support from across the political spectrum.

The launch comes as British politics waits to see if the French and Dutch vote no in their referendums at the end of this month. Britain is expected to abandon its referendum if the French say no.

Ship ahoy! Landlocked sculpture on sale



Pride of the Valley sculpture park in Surrey has works by Dali, Epstein and Ernst, but curator Eddie Powell has put this work by Paul Cas, *Ahoy*, up for sale in a Sotheby's auction this month at an estimated £20,000 to £30,000. Photograph: Roger Bamber

The well funded no campaign has brought together the business campaign previously called No and the Campaign for a Social Europe, a group of left wingers, greens and trade unionists opposed

to the constitution on the grounds that it is too pro-market and undermines the principles of social Europe.

The rival Britain in Europe campaign due to be re-launched as Yes attempts to

stymie the merger of the unions and business groups by insisting that the constitution can be supported by the left.

A letter signed by Robin Cook, Lord Hattersley and

Peter Kilroy says: "The treaty enshrines all that is best about the European social model."

Patrick Wintour
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