



## Grassroots for Europe Round Table# 36

### “Changing Hearts and Minds on Freedom of Movement.”

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> May

**Context:** We will begin to explore how best to change hearts and minds regarding freedom of Movement (FOM) and raise awareness of the impact of losing rights, opportunities, and benefits for many millions of people, both UK Citizens living in the EU and EU Citizens in the UK. For the UK to join the single market, or rejoin the EU as a whole, it would be required to embrace the policy and secure majority popular support for it. Individuals’ reasons for opposition to FoM are many and varied and often based on beliefs, not robust facts. During the referendum campaign, Vote Leave and UKIP successfully conflated and confused asylum and immigration, and public attitudes to immigration in 2016 were negative after years of populist press propaganda, exacerbated by the aftermath of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. Since the referendum, attitudes to immigration and refugees seem to have softened somewhat. Ending FoM has led to severe shortages in the UK labour market for several sectors of the economy, particularly hospitality, retail, health, and social care. As travel resumes post-COVID, British voters are discovering they are directly affected too, in terms of travel delays and lost opportunities to live, work, study, fall in love, raise a family, or retire in the EU.

**Michaela Benson – Professor in Public Sociology at Lancaster University. “Debunking misperceptions about freedom of movement”**

Michaela Benson is professor in public sociology at Lancaster University. She has expertise in migration, citizenship and identity and is currently leading the MiG Zen project, researching the long-term impacts of Brexit on migration between the UK and EU. The talk focused on three main misconceptions about Freedom of Movement (FoM) and how these might be approached.

#### **Freedom of Movement**

- is seen as one-way traffic.
- is thought to be unconditional.
- distinguishing FoM from other aspects of EU and UK migration regimes

#### **One-way traffic**

The EU and its member states accounted for 60% of emigration of British citizens in the period immediately before the UK left the EU. Contrary to what is generally believed, the UK has a really high level of emigration per capita, ranking in the top five in the world. Freedom of movement gave UK citizens’ rights to work across the whole range of EU labour markets, from seasonal work in hospitality and tourism to highly skilled, specialist and academic sectors.

Post Brexit, those already in the EU retained their rights to live and work in their country of residence but lost the right to onward movement within the EU. They also lost rights to return to the UK with non-British family members via the Surinder Singh route, making their family members newly subject to the UK’s domestic immigration controls, which are both costly and time-consuming.

Since Brexit it has become much more difficult for British citizens to move to, live and work in the EU with the process being much more drawn out and costly. Post Brexit, they are subject to individual member states’ domestic immigration controls, do not have the automatic right to work,

nor the same access to health and social entitlements. There is likely to be a significant shift in the demographics of people moving from the UK to the EU, with movement being considerably less accessible for those who have lower levels of education, earn less, and have fewer assets to support their migration. Post Brexit, opportunities for cultural and work exchange are far more restricted, making it much harder for British citizens to be globally competitive.

### **Freedom of Movement as unconditional**

Evidence shows that people in the UK assume that the UK approach to Freedom of Movement is the same in other EU states. Prior to Brexit, the UK chose to exercise very little oversight of who moved to the UK and on what terms, with no real requirement for people to register as an EU citizen. This is certainly not the case across EU member states. For example, in the Netherlands all EU citizens are required to register their residence, including to gain access to the rental or labour market. At issue is the way in which Freedom of Movement is framed in the UK as being unconditional and unrestricted. Although Freedom of Movement was an EU directive, to a certain degree its implementation remains in the hands of member states. There is considerable irony in the mantra "Take back control" as the UK deliberately chose not to use the powers of control which it possessed. Freedom of Movement always was conditional, with member states retaining the right of enforcement. In any free movement regime, there are conditions determining who has right of entry and on what terms.

### **Freedom of Movement and the politics of migration**

Part of changing the narrative on Freedom of Movement has to lie in not presenting it in opposition to other forms of migration which runs the risk of being drawn into the divisive politics of migration as stirred up by politicians in the UK, as in the Illegal Immigration Bill.

It is important that the argument for Freedom of Movement is not seen as privileging some populations at the expense of others. It is therefore important to counteract prominent narratives in respect of the migrant crisis. Although the numbers entering the UK via small boats or applying for asylum account for a very small percentage of those entering the UK, these are constantly highlighted in the news media. It begs the question, "What is the political purpose of this?" So, we need to have a joined-up account of the continuum from Freedom of Movement through to asylum and what forms of solidarity we can develop. Statements such as "I am not a migrant" are to be avoided as they can serve to fuel divisive politics. There is a need to see how the politics of migration interplays with an understanding of free movement and to be aware of potential damage to migrant solidarity. Campaigning for Freedom of Movement should be built on literacy and solidarity with particular attention to the language used.

### **Mike Galsworthy – National Chair European Movement "How to change opinions around Free Movement".**

Mike is founder and director of Bylines Network and Scientists for Europe. The basis for this talk is his article in *Yorkshire Bylines* (17 and 20 March 2023) about polling he commissioned from Omnis. Free movement is a stumbling block to getting back into the EU because it was such a vitriolic topic previously, and along with immigration issues as a whole has scarred many politicians. However, polling on immigration produces widely varying results depending on how the questions are phrased. Consequently, it is necessary to set the framework of polling ourselves, rather than by reacting to others' framework.

### **How do we frame the questions?**

Polling on immigration and free movement provides more positive results when framed within the context of benefits to the UK, whether to the economy, public services or as opportunities for UK citizens. This is better than asking about numbers of people coming here. Previously, free movement was framed as a free-for-all one-way movement into the UK, whereas our polling was framed in basic terms of our rights, opportunities and principles of fairness. When asked firstly, "Do

you think Brits should have the freedom to travel and work across European countries?" people answered 79% Yes, 11% No and 11% Don't Know. Conservative voters said 73% Yes, 17% No. Leave voters said 71% Yes, 15% No. So broadly speaking, British people think they should have the right to travel freely and work in Europe.

The follow-up question was: "Do you think there should be mutual free movement for British citizens to travel and work across Europe and European citizens to travel and work in Britain?" The reply was Yes 72%, No 14% Don't Know 14%. Once people assert their own rights, it is only a marginal shift to accepting as fair that those rights are mutual or reciprocal: Conservatives said 67% Yes, 21% No, and Leave voters said 66% Yes, 20% No. So, two thirds of Tory and two thirds of Leave voters essentially approved of free movement. However, that is very different from deeply understanding the issue or wanting to defend freedom of movement.

The basic point, however, is about framing the questions properly. Those initial questions were followed by other questions about Brexit. (a) "Do you think the Brexit deal undermined the UK's ability to handle immigration?" Overall, 46% said Yes, 20% said No and 34% said Don't Know. The Conservative and Leave answers led us to consider the possible benefit of adding the question about a better handling of a returns policy to these ideas of mutual rights to free movement.

### **Issues with Labour**

Some in the European Movement team with experience of the Labour Party know that the phrase "free movement" has intimidated Labour activists and employees: they fear that with certain people it's a hostility button. So, with careful language and framing about fairness, we might start talking about our rights in exchange for other rights deals, such as free movement with certain financial or employment conditions, as in other EU and European countries. (The UK's 'freedom of movement' regime was the least restricted or regulated, and was the choice of the government, not the EU). Continuing questions of "what if" will reveal what people believe to be fundamentally fair, so that we can correctly frame questions about new 'deals.' Those 'deals' could include relations with the EU and also some UK systems in order to make it fair, possibly more EU workers to prop up the NHS in exchange for young people's work and study opportunities or the right of older people to retire to the EU.

The aim is to identify the fundamental mechanics of what voters proactively want, and to sell free movement piecemeal on those terms. At present there is no point trying such polling in the Red Wall seats, because Labour will not shift their present stance and are cock-a-hoop after their recent successes. But if we can show that those very same Red Wall switchers are open to certain specific elements of free movement in return for fair deals, it gives Labour the opportunity to mention economic benefits in a way that keeps their core demographic onside. This approach maintains the basic principles of free movement.

**Richard Bentall – Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Sheffield “Is Freedom of Movement a difficult sell?”** (PowerPoint slides supported this discussion)

Many issues about the perception of migration are actually psychological issues. Certain 'authoritarian' personality traits are known to predict a very negative attitude towards people who look different. These 'authoritarian' traits have been studied by psychologists since World War II and about 30%-50% of the population of any country appears to have them to some degree, although nobody quite knows where they come from (there is very little relationship between authoritarianism in parents and their children, for example). People with these traits are not normally very right wing or authoritarian until something happens which causes them anxiety, after which they become hostile towards anybody who is different from them. A very large survey conducted shortly after the Brexit referendum measured authoritarianism indirectly by asking people about their attitudes to child rearing (authoritarian people tend to think that children should behave rather than be creative, for example). There was a strong interaction between the attitudes of authoritarian people towards Brexit and their personal financial health. Those who were

financially secure were no more likely to vote for Brexit than nonauthoritarian people but those who were struggling financially nearly all (> 90%) voted to leave. In France, the same circumstances led authoritarians to vote for LePen and in America for Trump. The main point to glean from this was that attitudes towards migration were an important issue in 2016 and likely contributed to the outcome.

However, the same dynamics which existed at the time of the referendum no longer seem to exist. Professor Bentall had expected that the cost-of-living crisis would trigger authoritarian people but that does not seem to be happening for the majority of voters, although plenty of authoritarian types can be found screaming about the small boats crisis on social media.

Indeed, attitudes towards migrants have been shifting in a very interesting and unexpected way over the last few years. (Professor Bentall showed some slides at this point.) Polling shows that overall people are becoming more positive than negative about migration, with overwhelming support for nurses, doctors, care workers, fruit pickers, catering staff and construction workers. This surprisingly positive attitude towards migration may arguably arise from a feeling that migration since Brexit is better controlled - the issue for Brexiters was never to stop migration, but to control it. When campaigning for freedom of movement, we should remember that most people thought of it as uncontrolled.

If most people are no longer as hostile towards migrants as they were in 2016, what are the implications for attitudes towards the single market? In fact, putting the issue of migration to one side, there is little evidence that the people of the UK were ever hostile towards single market membership. Polling during the referendum indicated that the majority of Leave voters did not expect to leave the single market, for example. In 2017 Rand Europe carried out a survey giving people lots of choices between different policy combinations. This indicated that people then placed greater value on the ability to make trade deals and on access to the Single Market than on restricting freedom of movement and were not really bothered about sovereignty (which has always been an abstract concept to most people). The only issue of concern with respect to freedom of movement was undue demand on public services like the NHS and schools.

Some of Professor Bentall's recent polling has moved away from simple questions of agreeing or disagreeing and has focused on discovering what is acceptable to the majority of people (there is unlikely to be a Brexit scenario that makes everyone happy but there may well be one that a strong majority will say is acceptable). A study he carried out in December 2021 and repeated in June 2022 asked people about various Brexit related options: (a) an independent sovereign UK, which is basically a hard Brexit; (b) rethink Brexit, which is basically rejoin; and (c) a new deal with Europe, which is basically some kind of compromise. These options were explained in much more detail than in conventional polling. The second poll added three versions of the New Deal of Europe: (a) free trade, (b) free movement: (c) both (a) and (b) that is, completely rejoining the Single Market.

These studies showed that freedom of movement and free trade are acceptable to a huge majority of people. The slides show that rejoining the Single Market is more acceptable than unacceptable even to Leave voters. The same is true for people who didn't vote in the 2016 referendum. This and other polling show that nearly two-thirds of the UK population would now support the UK gaining access to the Single Market.

#### **What are the implications of this research?**

(a) It seems that freedom of movement should not be a hard sell, unless people are more positive towards migrants simply because we're now controlling migration in a different way. With this worry in mind, we should make sure that we emphasise that freedom of movement is not the same as uncontrolled migration (some EU countries are quite restrictive, requiring people to be

able to support themselves for example). We also need to stress reciprocity of benefits to counter the idea that Britain gets nothing back from migration.

(b) Timing is a tricky issue. At the moment, Labour seems utterly resistant to changing their stance. Many frustrated Labour Party members are asking the same question: "Is this just a hyper-cautious stance until after the next general election or does it really mean that we should not rejoin the Single Market?"

(c) If Labour are being temporarily over-cautious, everything will change following the next general election, because most Labour members and the majority of MPs favour closer relationships with Europe. Whether or not Labour's official stance changes, it seems very likely that the lid come off the pressure cooker and Labour members and MPs will start talking about the damage done by Brexit. If Labour were to interpret that the Lib Dems are gaining votes from them because they are more pro-Europeans, this might give them cause to think in the short term.

(d) We must use simple messages which highlight key benefits and people's real concerns. The average person is not politically sophisticated. Some people don't even know what voting means, many are not registered to vote, and are turned off or confused by what they see of politicians in the media.

(e) Professor Bentall's polling method might be useful in the Red Wall seats in order to test Labour's stance. At present it feels like the Red Wall is holding the whole country to ransom. Politicians seem to be talking to quite a small group rather than to all of us. This lack of representative evidence is a serious problem.

(f) Professor Bentall finished with a (rhetorical) question: "Given the omerta preventing politicians speaking out about freedom of movement, who are our opinion leaders? Where is our Farage?"

## Question & Answers:

**Question: - Do you have any data on the number of UK nationals who have successfully moved to the EU since the end of the transition period; and are comparisons available to pre-Brexit.**

**Answer Michaela Benson.** No, we don't. It's probably too early. And aside from anything else, those statistics would be slightly anomalous, given the rush for people to get in before the end of the Brexit transition periods. Only time will tell. But we can anticipate, just as we've already seen, in the case of EU citizens coming to the UK, that there will be significant changes, not necessarily in terms of overall numbers, although I would have thought there would be but in terms of the demographics, as I said, in terms of who was able to go, and what they do when they arrive.

**Question for Mike: In NL you must register for a social security number (BSN) within 3 months of arrival, and you must be in employment or have means - re Mike's talk - do you think by splitting the components of FOM we might sell the concept more easily in bits as it were?**

**Answer: Mike Galsworthy:** Yes, I do think that splitting FoM into its two components (3-month visa - and conditions for longer stay) is a good approach.

**Question: Those of us involved in campaigning on behalf of migrants will have experience of dealing with the press and trying, not always successfully, to challenge stereotypes about who migrants are (e.g., every article ever published about British citizens in Spain seems to be illustrated by a beach or a bar!). Do the speakers have any suggestions for combatting these stereotypes when engaging with journalists?**

**Answer: Richard Bentall:** So, let us look at this the other way around, it seems to me that what we do have is people that work with migrant groups we should ask their advice. So, if you've got experience of countering these kinds of stereotypes, then maybe that should be one of the things which the European Movement should do to engage with organisations that have got experience in

this area, because I suspect that we could actually learn quite a lot from those kinds of organisations.

**Answer: Michaela Benson:** I think some of it's about the messaging and learning from people who've had experience of that type of messaging, and I should answer to the question around "how do we counteract the stereotypes?" ~ Fiona Godfrey and I have on many, many occasions when we've worked with the media been trying to combat the images of British citizens who live in the EU. So, they don't have those pictures of people sitting in bars and things like that. But this is a challenge that's been faced by a lot of migrant rights organisations. And there's a brilliant campaign that I really recommend everybody looks at from **Migrant Rights Network**, who are constantly challenging both the words and the images that are used to describe migrants and migration. And I think this is a really important piece of education that people can learn from so paying attention to that is important. Also challenging journalists and pushing back when they use those images and messages.

**Question: Given the complexity of the single market project, do you think it better for us to wait for a change of government and then start communicating around this topic of freedom of movement?**

**Answer: Michaela Benson:** In terms of whether we should wait until there's a new government, I think the important thing is to get the message right. And then, you know, you are ready and good to go. Which is what Richard and Mike were saying we need to get ahead of it. So, the truth is, and I know that this has been reflected on here today, that there's a certain public discourse that has shifted so much under this government that it will take a long time for it to be pulled back. And it won't be overnight when a new government comes in. It will take years and years and years to change public attitudes. So, it's a long game. It's not a short game.

**Question: Would you be able to share the evidence that most leave voters didn't expect to leave single market? Would be great for Brexit Inquiry to explore why and how things were manipulated towards a hard Brexit....and not respecting the "will of the people" at least those who voted Leave...**

**Answer: Richard Bentall** I can't find the name of the polling company, but it was in June 2016 and was a very large poll. 66% said they thought it was fairly or very unlikely that that we would leave the single market that was leave voters, people who said they were going to vote leave. So, it seems to be the case that the majority of people want to be outside the European sort of free movement system, if I could put it like that, at any point in time.

**Question: Should we do more to embrace and celebrate Freedom of Movement rather than just accept it?**

**Answer Richard Bentall:** Embrace and celebrate migrant migration. Yes, as much as we can, that, obviously, it would be a positive thing, but I'm struck by two things. One is that on the one hand, the Tories make it very difficult to disentangle all this from the ongoing political kind of mayhem in Britain. And the polarisation of Tories who seem to be set on a path of trying to wind up these authoritarian people and their strategy seems to be designed to do that. And they're trying to get over a language from Suella Bravermann and people like that, which is, of course being widely condemned and is trying to appeal to that base. But it's not working. It really isn't that British people are more hostile towards migrants, despite all the things which you see in the newspapers and the howling about boats and stuff like that. People seem to be broadly positive about migration.

I think it's great when you can see people on Twitter like this smart Somali refugee came to Britain as a teenager and is now a consultant psychiatrist in the NHS. And things like that are important and I wish that that migration would be more visible in that sort of way. I work with a team of Pakistani researchers, some of them based in England, some based in Pakistan, on a public mental health project. And these are people who are doing really important research which benefit

the health of people in this nation. But when you hear people talk about the Pakistani community, nobody ever talks about people like that. So, I think it would be a very good idea to try and sort of emphasise those kinds of case studies. But unfortunately, we can't guarantee that the Tories aren't going to try and weaponize migration within the next election. Of course, it very probably will backfire on them because of one thing, which they're going to find difficult to do is and that is to do with anything about boats, which is only a tiny part of the migration this year anyway. And I think a lot of people now feel given the cost-of-living crisis, they kind of spot it as a distraction anyway.

**Question: Should local grassroots campaigners be exploring initiatives to inform and persuade the public about FoM? Also, could the speakers recommend any resources to help campaigners educate themselves, so they can be informed when discussing FoM with others.**

**Answer: Richard Kilpatrick:** I actually think that everyone involved in this discussion will probably have resources that they can share. So, I urge you all to get in touch and share or whatever resources you have. And I think I could probably answer on behalf of the speakers. On the first point absolutely. However, there is a very fine line between campaigning to change opinion and campaigning to educate. Often, we do get very bogged down in campaign to turn to educational activities. And I think we do have to do a bit of both, depending on the audience and the segmentation that that we speak to. And that is probably the one thing that we need to take from a lot of these discussions is that we do need to do a lot more understanding of our audience.

**Question: Can we all start thinking about some killer, killer quotes for some of the marches, if we can come up with some form of wording?**

**Answer: Richard Kilpatrick:** Yes, absolutely One or two or three, then test, test and then play. It is important to test exhaustively.

#### Other Information

**Andrew - Save Freedom of Movement - "Save Freedom of Movement" campaign @SaveFOM on Twitter.** <https://twitter.com/savefom>. We work to promote better understanding of FOM x4 (FOM of People) because it's such a key factor to helping us rejoin the EU. We have also brought together around 12,000-part year residents/dwellers who are campaigning to improve mobility for everyone. We have campaigns for people in Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Cyprus, and Italy. The movement keeps growing. My So my campaign ask would be to direct any "seasonal workers, itinerant workers, second homeowners, part year residents, business owners, authors, freelancers".... anyone who was/is MOBILE between multiple countries... please ask them to follow @saveFOM and get in touch with us (DMs are open).