



Summary report of Grassroots for Europe Round Table #38: *Labour and Brexit – time for change?*

Tuesday July 11th 2023

Session theme and context

Growing concerns are being voiced that Labour's 'Make Brexit work' policy will not work, either as a way to save our economy from Brexit, or as a sure way to save our democracy from Brexiters. Polling evidence increasingly suggests that the public, business and union leaders know Brexit has harmed us and offers no hope of better things to come; that Starmer's Brexitry is far from sure to gain Labour votes or seats in a 2024 election; that opinion is wide open to any rational change of policy that offers hope of a better future.

Should pro-Europeans take their case directly to the public, should they keep making their case to and through the political parties, or should it be a mix of both? And how direct should the challenge be to currently cautious, timid or stubbornly perverse opposition leaderships? This session of the pro-European campaign stakeholders' forum brought together experienced politicians, campaigners and observers for a frank and open discussion.

Chair's introductory comments

Richard Corbett CBE [*Former Leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party, Hon Vice-Chair, European Movement UK, Hon Vice-President, Labour Movement for Europe*].

Welcome and thanks for joining us. As the full consequences of Brexit and its ramifications become clearer by the week. - as public opinion continues to slowly but steadily shift towards ever higher majorities saying that Brexit was a mistake, the debate has now been triggered as to whether the Labour Party's position of trying to make Brexit work and going for some low-hanging fruits in negotiating a new relationship with the EU, is sufficient? Is it sufficient as a strategy to regenerate economic growth when the consequences of being

outside the European Union in general, and the single market and the Customs Union in particular, are becoming so apparent? Is it even a sensible strategy, not only in terms of the national interest, but in pure electoral terms? Have we not reached the position where a forlorn attempt to appease a diminishing number of people who still think Brexit was a good idea, risks alienating a larger and growing number of voters who are critical of Brexit? These are the questions which we would like to explore over the next hour with our expert panellists.

Panel presentations.

Peter Foster is public policy editor of the *Financial Times* since 2020, writer of the *FT*'s weekly 'Britain After Brexit' newsletter, European editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, 2015-20. His book, *What went wrong with Brexit, and what can we do about it?* (forthcoming on September 7th 2023, Canongate) is, according to Emily Maitlis, a book everyone should read, re-read, and then memorise.

Peter stressed that he spoke to the GfE Round Table in a personal capacity.

What went wrong with Brexit, and what can we do about it? was written after a *Financial Times* video on the costs of Brexit received 5 million views, alerting a publisher to a new space for a Brexit conversation. Previously nobody wanted to publish on this topic: Brexit books don't sell because the public doesn't care about Brexit because politicians don't want to talk about it – a classic vicious circle. The polls are changing, yet politicians are not scoring points by blaming Brexit or blaming the Tory party for a Brexit that is, for example, strangling the British car industry.

“How mature is the discussion about Brexit?”

It is easy to overestimate the extent to which the impacts of Brexit are understood in the wider political conversation. Many problems are attributable to Brexit, but not by the main political actors. Can that change before or after the general election? Nothing in Labour's current Brexit offer alters the present situation: it bemoans Johnson's Brexit deal while sticking to exactly the same red lines that created it. At best, Labour talks only about a

Canada-style, bare-bones trade agreement.

How has immature debate affected businesses?

Businesses are trying to integrate into EU supply chains. Areas like mobility for artists, workers, etc. also affect the economy. More important is the impact of UK policymaking on businesses. The Retained EU Law Bill, for example, is based on the complete inversion of reality, with Jacob Rees-Mogg contending that the Bill would boost productivity. The elephant in the room here is that businesses are not embracing a bonfire of regulation in order to have re-regulation. What they want is single regulation that allows them to access large markets (i.e. the Single Market).

Serious discussion of Brexit requires analysis of why Brexit has failed.

It failed not because of insufficient zeal, as some have alleged, but because it was based on a set of fallacies about being shackled to the corpse of EU regulation. Brexit was not based on the reality or interests of those who move and make things: 50% of UK exports come from manufacturing, with high-end research and development done by manufacturing for manufacturing. The government pays lip service to AI, Fintech, Medtech, etc, but most of that research goes into making and doing things that impact the real basis of the economy. 50% of UK exports are goods, but of those goods that go to the EU 65%-70% are integrated into EU supply chains. The higher value exports in higher value sectors can produce higher paying and more reliable jobs in the Midlands and the North. However, UK manufacturing is squeezed out as companies like AstraZeneca, Pfizer and others seek to invest in Ireland rather than here.

The dangers of immature debate about Brexit reality and economic failure.

Labour could re-frame this discussion, but insistence on its 'red lines' would be damaging and slow down a shift in the EU's attitudes. It will be hard to make progress in an incremental, iterative way because the EU Commission is sticking to its guns on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), for example on rules of origin for cars. Consequently, re-framing the discussion in Britain must re-open the politically sensitive question of the level playing field. Furthermore, the EU needs to be convinced that a future UK government will commit to a much more aligned relationship. That means engaging in a

beneficial deep sectoral alignment, such as on cars or chemicals. Another danger arises from the failure to understand the time needed for realignment. The House of Lords, for example, has talked about mutual recognition of professional qualifications, but the EU will not agree without a fundamental re-writing of the EU-UK relationship. The Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), for example, has a section on mutual recognition of qualifications, but it took nine rounds of negotiation and a whole year to get mutual recognition on architects' qualifications, which is the easiest one to do. Agreements are very complex and time-consuming, and even then agreement does not guarantee access. So the UK may find itself a small country outside the club, and a massive rule-taker without a seat at the table.

Can Labour take on the hostile media?

Accepting an outsider, rule-taking status as a starting point for reintegration would be very difficult after 30-40 years of media hostility towards the EU. During the 2020 debates about co-operation with the EU on Covid vaccines these traditional, deep-seated prejudices about boring old Brussels and red tape prevented politicians like Starmer from taking on the *Sun* and other newspapers. Labour would need to shift the conversation from identity and hostile prejudices to economic realities, the need to attract trade, investment and high-value jobs. The opinion polls show that many people feel they were right to vote Leave, but that Brexit has been bad for them personally and for the economy generally. Politically the new conversation must focus on the industrial and employment benefits of alignment. The difficulty is that any benefits will be slow to come. The Labour Party would face intense political heat for "being in hock to Brussels" for quite modest initial gains, particularly if they stick to their current red lines.

Should Labour aim higher?

Peter Foster suggests that aiming higher than those red lines would pay a much bigger dividend much more quickly, and would make more sense, but that Labour is too reluctant to publicly promote ideas which are contrary to the lies people were told about the Single Market that led to Brexit in the first place. During the discussion about the EU Laws Bill the *Sun* was still writing stories about bendy bananas - seven years after the Brexit referendum, three years after the disastrous TCA was negotiated – but nobody in the Labour Party took them on or looks like they ever will take them on.

The dangers of not re-framing the discussion early enough.

There is a danger that in not re-framing the discussion early enough, the UK-EU relationship may end up on the back burner as a second-term issue. In the meantime, however, commercial and diplomatic relationships will be constantly developing and diverging. The EU is at present discussing a huge amount of significant new regulation, including carbon border adjustment, plastic packaging, taxes, deforestation, supply chain due diligence. The longer the UK remains outside those regulations the more investment decisions will simply move the UK away from the Single Market, and trying to reboot the relationship with the EU will provide ever-diminishing returns. The downside, already starting, will come in the government's fiscal position. A Prime Minister who has virtually nothing of note about the EU in his manifesto, and who sticks to red lines that bring us further away from Europe, may end up prioritising domestic battles – to the long-term detriment of UK citizens.

Laura Parker is Chief of Staff, The Good Law Project, Strategy Advisor, Labour for a New Democracy, National Committee Member of Another Europe is Possible, former National Coordinator, Momentum.

Laura's talk considers the question "How do we shift Labour?" from the perspective of a Labour member.

Historic roots of the Labour Party's Position

There is an assumption that the Labour Party is, or should be, a Remain party. After Prime Minister Edward Heath had taken us into Europe in 1973, Harold Wilson - with a cabinet split on the issue - promised a referendum. Labour policy started to shift to a more pro-European position from 1983, under the leadership of Neil Kinnock and then John Smith. However, there was still a significant proportion of Euro-sceptics both within the Labour party and in the wider trade union movement. Mick Lynch, Secretary General of the RMT is a classic example of the very determinedly socialist, rather than social democratic position, which has always been incredibly Euro-sceptic. This position rejected the Maastricht criteria on the grounds that a neo-liberal economic model would be locked into the heart of the way the EU was constructed. Although now a minority view of perhaps less

than 10% of Labour Party membership, it is one still held by a significant number of trade unionists and therefore has a significant impact on the Labour Party. So there has always been a wing of the party sceptical about the economics of the EU. There is another wing which, although its members probably voted to stay in, has problems with the perceived democratic deficit.

If we fast forward to 1997, Tony Blair was clearly an unapologetic pro-European and since then the party has been fairly pro-European. Nevertheless, the PLP is more interested in how it can wrong-foot the Conservatives' position on Europe than in consolidating its own stance. The referendum campaign exposed and highlighted many of the historic divisions and created a nervousness about voting for pro-European policy. There is still a wide range of views, although polling between 2016 and 2019 suggests that about 80% voted to remain.

The situation at present

With a General Election looming, there is a fear that if Brexit becomes an election issue, the task of winning will be significantly harder. Ironically, many of the most instinctively pro-European people in the party are also in the party leadership. The party's electoral strategy is all about winning back the so-called "hero-voters" in red-wall seats. This results in Labour not having much of a position on Brexit and seeking to avoid a discussion it does not want to have. Pre-election efforts to shift the party's public headline discussion are not going to get very far although this is not to say there is no room for preparatory work. Leaving a Labour push until a second term is longer than we can afford to wait. There is still a year and a half of possible preparatory work even if the manifesto offers little in the way of radical changes. A caveat to this would be if there were a massive pro-European shift in the polls.

The way forward

To have a meaningful discussion about Europe it is important to find a way of placing the blame for the dire consequences of Brexit fairly and squarely on the politicians who misled the nation but doesn't make it sound as though those who were persuaded were idiots to

fall for the lie. It would be folly for Labour to appear to be insulting the very people whose votes it needs. Consequently, as Stella Creasy explained in a recent podcast, we need to find a way of articulating a moving-on strategy, a different and depersonalised conversation which does not fall foul of treating a section of the electorate as though they were at fault.

Firstly, it is vital to have a big internal lobbying push – a strategy advocated by those who understand the psychology of the party where many feel to have a kind of family relationship and will not be driven by external pressure. This strategy involves getting motions to Conference. For example, the Labour Movement for Europe currently has a high-level motion on its website advocating as a priority the rebuilding of relationships with our European neighbours in the interests of national security, the economy, climate and trade. It also talks about a Labour manifesto commitment to reducing the paperwork caused by Brexit. Although these are not really the fundamentals, it is probably as far as Labour can go at present. There is also a major commitment to a visa system which would tackle travel and trading delays. So pro-Europeans inside the tent should attempt to influence local constituency party meetings to submit motions to Conference. This strategy is currently being employed to promote the PR campaign, pursuing the party through its national policy forum process. The Labour Movement for Europe has been making submissions to what is an enormous, high level policy programme to be agreed by the end of July as a backdrop to the policy manifesto.

Secondly, in terms of engagement with deep sectoral alignment, the trade union movement has significant influence on Labour Party policy. In fact, when it comes to final agreements about the manifesto, trade union general secretaries will have more influence than the majority of the shadow cabinet and certainly more than the rank-and-file membership. So, it is important to work with trade unions and trade councils.

Thirdly, a significant factor is the polls. The task for those not closely aligned with the party is to leverage every single shift in public polling so this will help shape internal decisions.

Jackie Jones is a Welsh politician, barrister and academic, MEP for Wales 2019-20, Professor of Feminist Legal Studies University of the West of England, County Councillor (Cardiff), Chair of Wales for Europe, Executive Committee, Labour Movement for Europe.

Jackie opened by reminding us that the Co-operative Party, sister party of Labour, has an influential role to play in the Labour Party, for example nominating candidates for selection. This is important as the Co-operative Party counts a considerable number of pro-Europeans amongst its members. The LME has a similar affiliate status.

After wholeheartedly endorsing the comments made by the two previous speakers, Jackie stressed that a necessary component of winning a Rejoin campaign is an appeal to the heart.

Firstly, we should concentrate on getting PR and on the younger generation, many of whom think Brexit is ridiculous. Although the younger generation may not be members of a political party, they have strong political views and we must bring the causes they care about to the fore. We should point out that many important issues such as the sewage crisis could be resolved through EU membership and the principle of the polluter pays.

Secondly, new, future-orientated arguments are needed to counter the trend towards right-wing extremism in many countries across Europe.

Thirdly, we need to campaign on issues which relate specifically to the UK and the Conservatives' right-wing agenda. For example, the possible Tory manifesto promise to take us out of the Council of Europe would allow for the possible reinstatement of the death penalty. There is also a campaign to be fought over job losses, for example in Bridgend, where factory closure has brought the loss of around 300 well-paid, specialist jobs.

Labour is saying little about these developments. But, it is not just about England – Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland in particular can play an important role. Welsh Labour and the Welsh Senedd do debate Brexit, human rights and immigration regularly and seriously, which may lead to differences with Labour elsewhere, especially with Mark Drakeford stepping down in the near future. An obvious opportunity to work for a closer relationship with the EU is through NGO representation on advisory committees of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA) which comes up for revalidation in 2025-26.

Enthusing and empowering young people, fighting extremism, raising the very serious issue of job losses (for example at Bridgend) and making sure we influence the 2026 TCA revision as much as possible are important areas in which to concentrate our efforts.

Q and A

Richard Corbett: There seems to be widespread agreement that muddling through, trying to make Brexit work, going for the low-hanging fruits of rejoining research programmes, Erasmus, visa agreements, et cetera, important as they are, won't actually cut it when it comes to turning around the economy. But there is perhaps a reluctance to draw the necessary conclusion before the general election, rather than do a u-turn afterwards with all its consequences, or leave it to a second term. Labour needs to shift now to a more ambitious position. Peter, even in your book, which I've had the chance to look through, full of convincing reasons why being outside the single market and Customs Union is a disaster for British manufacturing, for instance - you say it puts British manufacturing at a permanent structural disadvantage, it will mean we "gradually fall out of the supply chains that sustain those sectors" - yet you don't actually conclude that therefore Labour should go for full alignment with a single market, like (but different from) Norway, let alone rejoin the European Union. Laura and Jackie say the Labour Movement for Europe is pressing for closer relations, rebuilding trust, but not going as far as to say we should at the very least realign with the single market, join the Customs Union, let alone rejoin. Aren't we all being a little bit too timid if we want to shape this debate? Debate needs outriders, people who are willing to stick their neck out to then make it easier for others to at least shift gradually along behind them. And isn't that the role of organisations like the Labour Movement for Europe, or of good journalism, or Grassroots for Europe, of course, in and beyond the Labour Party. But shouldn't we all be doing that and arguing the case within the Labour Party that the dial has shifted, the weight of evidence of the damage of Brexit to our economic prospects is so much more visible than even a year or two ago? And the shift in public opinion is now so significant that it's actually going to be an electoral liability for Labour, if it doesn't have a more courageous position, because it will lose voters. I see there was someone in the chat saying "I'm hanging by a thread as a party member": Labour risk losing voters to the Greens and the Lib Dems, if they outflank us, which, if I was one of them, I would certainly be trying to do. Should we not all be a little bit more outspoken?

Peter Foster: Richard, I think everyone on this call shares your frustration. My strategy in this book is one of show, don't tell. As Laura was saying, people don't want to be told they were stupid, didn't want to be told they were wrong. A couple of people have read it and

said, what you're basically saying is rejoin. And I say, well you could draw that conclusion if you wanted to. It's my job as a journalist to lay out what the limitations are of Labour Party policy, and the Labour Party has been very disingenuous about what it says. And this is where I think, genuinely there's a problem. The Labour Party is being as disingenuous about its Brexit plans and what they can deliver as the Tories were. Because what you're going to end up with is a load of political pain for very little economic gain. If you say let's have a mobility agreement, well, you're not going to get one with quotas and restrictions, it's going to be an EU wide deal. And, yes, the Tories are going to say that's free movement by the back door. You've got to make the argument for having those people come here, lots of young people: well, I don't think this Labour Party is much braver than the Tory party is on immigration; are they going to stand up and have the argument? Laura would know that much better than me, but it doesn't look like it from where I sit. If that is your level of courage, good luck!

Richard Corbett: I think we're all of the view that Labour needs to be more courageous. The question is how to push that along. You answered the question very clearly, as regards your book: you're setting out the facts so that hopefully people will draw their own conclusion rather than pointing the way too explicitly.

Jackie Jones: It isn't just about UK Labour, it's about Scottish Labour, Welsh Labour, it's also others being willing to speak out within the Labour movement and Labour Movement for Europe. I know that there are significant numbers of people who are coming to the LME, for endorsement for selection to be a Labour candidate for the general election. And that is an encouraging sign. It's not just in Remain areas, it's in Red Wall areas as well. And through these mechanisms, we can also influence, but I don't think it's going to change the leadership attitudes right now. What some of us are hoping and have heard, is that post general election, if Labour wins. It will become slightly better. But I'm not happy at all. And it's very challenging to stay within Labour, I understand the comments. But I hold the faith and I've been in the women's movement for 30 years, so I'm used to gaining a little and then going backwards a little bit. And then moving forward a little bit, and then going back a step.

Richard Corbett: The *New Statesman* said on the 26th of June that Labour's Remainers have been given assurances that its Brexit position will soften. Laura, have you been given any such assurance?

Laura Parker: [Laugh] I'm still hanging on for the electoral reform assurance. Just to be clear, I don't want to suggest that I think that this is the right strategy. I just think we have to be very honest with ourselves about what the strategy is. And in reply to your point, Richard, about the electoral case, I think anybody who's confident that they can really make the electoral case should make it. I think that for an entire movement to pin its position around an electoral case would be risky, because actually the party is so absolutely decided about the approach it has taken, which is to focus on this very narrow segment of hero voters, marginal seat swing votes. Not that that may not prove to be wrong, and/or they may shift position, at which point, people being ready to help them move, I think, is a good idea. But I wouldn't pin the strategy of an entire pro-European movement around it. Similarly, I think, yes, there should be some people who are making the "you must go further" case, and I think some of those people should be in the Labour Party. But you have to still be the friend who's there to say, well, I never told you I thought he was a complete shyster because you were going to marry him anyway. But now I'm here for tea and sympathy. I mean, Labour has to have some tea and sympathy people left as well. So I think perhaps, it's a little bit horses for courses. The only other thing I would say is I think you're completely right, it would be a heinous mistake for Labour to just not say anything and then do a massive U turn, I think what we have to encourage it to do is slowly to shift direction, in a course correction that perhaps many don't notice too much, and then accelerate, but not to do a handbrake turn, because that's not going to go down well with the electorate either.

Richard Corbett. And not to have explicit red lines that are so rigid that you come to reject them.

Laura Parker: Yes, and that is a nonsense. And I actually think what Keir needs to hear is from somebody, irrespective of what their politics are on Brexit, but someone who's run a country who says, for heaven's sake, don't brick up your exits. Because whatever the policy issue is, it's really daft for you to set these red lines, it's particularly daft when, as you say, the polls are shifting. So I think there's a broader political point.

Richard Corbett: I hope Peter will send Keir a copy of his book when it comes out.

Peter Foster: Manufacturers are furious because they understand what the red lines

mean. And one of the big problems here is that people say, quietly, oh, yes there'll be more movement from a Labour government after they win an election. But I wonder if they actually understand what that means. If you want to soften something in your Brexit policy to the point where you actually make a material difference in the discussion, you need to go to a load of places that they either haven't interrogated or don't fully understand. That's the problem. And it's the same problem we have with the Tories. It's a mushy debate that's based on UK positions and UK desires that are not filtered through the reality of an iterative negotiation with the European Commission, and an organisation that has 27 member states who have moved on, who don't want to relive the psychodrama. It's the same cakeism, which is all about us the UK, whether it's Labour or Tories, having a conversation about ourselves to ourselves, not having a conversation about what would materially alter the relationship. That's why I don't think we can go back on the red lines right now. Because actually, what you first have to say is, we need to repair the relationship. Most people don't know what the single market and the Customs Union really is. They don't know, they just know we want to be richer and better off and have better jobs and have car factories. You will say to people, do you want to join a customs union with the EU? 'No, never. Not in a month on Sundays'. Do you want to have a car industry? Oh, yeah, definitely. Well, you may need to make a choice. And I think framing it in terms of the Tories, this is the problem. Labour frame the debate in the Tories' own way. They say we're not going to be in the Single Market and Customs Union. That's a Tory Shibboleth, but they're so weak that they when you listen to them privately and in public, the implicit assumption of everything they say is that the Tories get to define the narrative on Brexit. They don't have an alternative narrative.

Laura Parker: I agree completely with that. But that's why also to your point about the industrial policy, I think it's so important that people think about how you influence the Labour Party and you influence it by either getting elected, which is pretty difficult; or by being a party member and hoping that someone eventually pays attention to you - we're doing all right on PR, but it's not easy; or by influencing the trade unions. And that is where I would go with my efforts. For those who don't know how the party votes on policy, either at conference or in its manifesto process, the trade unions have an enormous influence, and particularly the big guys, Unite, Unison, GMB, USDAW, they have significant influence. They have more political freedom, because many of their members have affiliated to the Labour Party, but many of them have not. And they have a much clearer sense of preserving the interests of their members, which is not the same as winning the

next general election, although those two things often seem to be very close to one another. They're a lot less afraid to speak out for the interests of their members. That is where I would focus my efforts, to be honest, because there are structures that one can influence, from trade councils to regional reps. There's a whole panoply of other organisations - the CBI doesn't exist much at the moment does it, but lots of other organisations interact with the trade unions as well. And that way, you're both talking to the ordinary working people who have drawn the perfectly sensible conclusion that this is mad, and you're influencing the party, and you're advancing that discussion. You can do that now. You don't have to just wait and hope that Labour win. And I think we neglected it too much, the Remain camp, the 2016 campaign didn't have enough of the voice of ordinary working people. Well, that is why I think the trade union part of the jigsaw is an important piece and not to be neglected.

Paul Willner: Peter, Emily Maitlis has got this spot-on about your book, it's a wonderful analysis. So thorough. And the second half in particular, where you're talking about what can be done, really provides a very detailed textbook for Labour of what they might do to mitigate the disaster that we're in, given their red lines. But I think the copy of the book that I saw was missing the last chapter, where you talk about how far those mitigations fall short, however well they're done, of, of what we had, or what we could have. And you don't anywhere examine the evidence to support Labour's red lines, which you assume as constraints at several points in the book. You talk, too uncritically I think, about how unpopular freedom of movement is, where the recent evidence is quite the reverse: that if freedom of movement is expressed as mutual freedom of movement, where Europeans can come here to live and work and we can go there to live and work and not have to stand in our queues to get our passport stamped. And when the question is asked in terms of mutual free movement, freedom of movement is massively popular. Mike Galsworthy commissioned Omnisis, a respectable polling company, who found 84% support for mutual freedom of movement. And a study I did with a colleague found massive support for mutual freedom of movement that was very similar among 2016 remainers and leavers. Is there evidence that red lines actually express the wishes of the general public? I don't think it's there.

Richard Wilson: I'm one of the people here who's not a member of the Labour Party. I'm actually a member of the Green Party. And the reason for that is primarily because of the Labour Party's position over the past few years on Europe. And really, I mean, the

frustration that has been displayed today, I've seen your efforts, Richard, I'm not dissing them, but I've seen the efforts of lots of great people here, and it's fallen on deaf ears. So I have been influencing Green Party policy towards Europe. And we adopted a new policy in Spring this year, which is far more pro-European than the previous one. So that's the approach that I'm taking. As has been said, there are people who are hanging by a thread, and I can understand why, I know of a lot of people where already the thread has broken. Now the reason for that it's very clear, because Laura has said it, that the people who Labour are chasing are called 'hero voters'. And I'm not sure what they call people like us. But my question is, how do we become 'hero voters'? Because it's pretty obvious that Labour are not concerned about voters like us, they take us very much for granted. And I think that needs to change. So how do we become the heroes? And how do we, therefore get Labour to pay some attention to us?

Colin Gordon: There was a story today in *The Times* Red Box saying that James Kanagasooriam, the inventor the Red Wall, the PR man who worked for the Tory party in 2019, has discovered that the Red Wall no longer exists as an entity, it doesn't have any distinctive feature differentiating it from the bog standard marginal constituency. So the Red Wall is gone. So therefore, it follows that “Red Wall” voter, which was the reason for the Labour red lines, has evaporated as a meaningful category and therefore the rationale for the entire Labour Party Brexit policy is just kind of disappearing into thin air. So maybe, we can now be a bit less conservative and cautious, about these prohibitions that the popular will was supposed to be putting in our way, and we can think a bit more boldly, as Richard has advocated.

Jackie Jones: One of Laura's points was about the unions, and I absolutely agree with that. There's something that's gone under the radar, I think for many people: in Wales, we passed the Social Partnership Act, which means that trade unions, the government and workplaces have to have workplace councils and work together in order to consult on policy and change the workplace. So that's a very European thing to do. There are other examples of pro-European policies within the devolved areas that have been passed both by the SNP in Scotland and in Wales, that align more closely with what is happening in Europe.

In terms of the Red Wall, I don't think it matters at the moment, because policy has been set and I can't see Keir Starmer's frontbench changing very much at all. And I live in a

constituency, which has a frontbencher as an MP, and so I don't see that changing very much - being a marginal seat, as a consequence of the disaster that is the Tory party and their policies. But I wouldn't suggest that that is gone forever. Because if everything well, there's going to be years and years of trying to change things and making things better, if we are not a one-term administration. But if we win the next general election, what the Tories will be hoping for is that we can't fix everything which we won't be able to do, and then they come back in and say, Look, Labour has done all this, and then there'll be a Red Wall or blue wall or green wall back in similar sort of circumstances because the fundamentals haven't changed. It is deprivation, poverty, lack of opportunity, inequalities, those things are the world over, it isn't a particular European thing. What we do about them is it might be a European way - or it might be a British way. But those issues will remain. So that's the answers that we need to seek as well and wrap them into a European flag.

Laura Parker: I agree with that. I'm afraid there isn't any easy answer about the frustrations of dealing with the party. You either are in it, and pull every lever that you can, whilst recognising that it can feel like a fairly thankless task, or, in fact, you go elsewhere and shore up the European courage of other parties. If a non-Labour Party member were to suggest that the election result could be quite important, I think many people who weren't in the Labour Party would probably say, the more progressives broadly described get elected, the better position we're in. So I guess, if you're not a Labour Party member, and you can help a pro-European from another party get elected, then you might consider that would be a good strategy; obviously, Labour Party members who suggest that get expelled. But either way, the real longer-term solution, is, of course, that we change the voting system. That is the only thing that will give our European partners the confidence that the UK isn't just going to lurch from one government to another. But it will also mean if we have a different voting system that we have a more frequent and better chance of a pro-European majority across a range of parties. At which point, I think we would find a lot of Labour Party people got their European courage up a little bit. But that is a longer-term solution. So there isn't an easy answer to the frustration that many of us are feeling, but I think we'll have to be realistic. And here, again, I'm with Jackie. Short of there being some major shift in polling around what was called the Red Wall, and a major shift in thinking by the party about its strategy, they've made it pretty clear it's going to be a narrow manifesto offering focused around these five missions. And it's going to be electorally targeted around the "hero voters". We are in a medium to long-term game, I guess, is the short story. Don't expect radical shifts between now and the election.

Richard Corbett: There will certainly be no shift unless somebody pushes for it.

Laura Parker: Which isn't me saying don't push for it, by the way.

Richard Corbett: Fair point. But perhaps opinion polls, if they continue to shift will help us make that case as well.

Peter Foster: I think if you look at some of the voting in the local elections in May, in the Red Wall, there was a strong suggestion that actually pro-Brexit voters moved more to Labour than lots of people understood. I don't think that seems to have filtered into the thinking. I agree with Laura. I'm not a political correspondent, but it does seem very stuck. I agree deeply with Jackie that the way to do this, when you talk about levelling up and all of the problems about productivity and economic growth and social deprivation, is to highlight that answers can lie in a European context.

And actually lots of the good things that we need to happen to try and address those issues need a deeper relationship with Europe. I'm not a politician, but one of the things I find amazing is that the Labour Party is not prepared to go after Conservative politicians responsible for the current hard Brexit. They knew perfectly well what they were doing, they're on the record half of them talking about the values of the single market. It seems odd to me, the idea that you can't make political punches land because they've made you poorer. They've literally made you poorer, and they're going to make you poorer, and this country. I mean, Starmer does sometimes say this, in this country median household incomes will be lower than Poland by the end of the decade. That didn't happen by accident. It's happened in part because of years of Jacob Rees-Mogg and Bill Cash and Boris Johnson opportunistically chasing chimaeras about Europe, that turned out to be nonsense. And that's our lived experience of being outside the single market. If you could change the narrative about the single market, everyone would be clapping their hands and saying, what an amazing thing! You can drive a box of bangers from Birmingham to Belfast, to Bonn and Bratislava and Barcelona and beyond, without let or hindrance, now we've lost that. What an amazing thing.

I'm going to disagree. I think, though, on the question of free movement, because my reading of the polls on free movement, is that both remainers and leavers like the bit of

free movement, which is to be free to go live more than 90 days in 180 in Spain, they all want young people around here, they all want to have taxi drivers, they all want all of this. But I think when you look into the polls, the bit that they like about the Points Based System is that the government gets to say who comes and who doesn't.

Richard Corbett: By the way, mass migration to Britain is from outside the EU, which was always a matter of national regulation, you could be as restrictive as you wanted as a country, but there wasn't a narrative of migration that was reciprocal freedom of movement, which was also conditional (we never enforced the conditions) of finding a job or being self sufficient.

Peter Foster: Yes. And if we can enforce the conditions like Austria, did, I completely agree with that. However, that's not a battle I would pick. Unrestricted free movement, I think is a hard sell. I think you can have a very liberal immigration regime...

Richard Corbett: You might not want to lead on it, but you've got to be able to defend a position on it.

Peter Foster: Yes, and indeed, even if you want a youth mobility scheme, you're going to have to defend the position. Right. But the point about a youth mobility scheme is it's no route to residency, it's young people, it fills a skills gap, it fills a seasonal workers gap. You could make that case, but I'm not even sure this Labour Party is prepared to make even that case that strongly. We'll see. But they are going to have to make the case. If they think they can do this all by subterfuge, they are kidding themselves. They're not going to be allowed to do that. They're going to have to defend some decisions on mobility and movement and regulation and alignment with Brussels that run against the grain of 40 years of Borisian tosh, about bendy bananas and about our sovereignty being taken away from us by Brussels. Think of the irony of the fact that actually we are rule-taking now because gravity means we have to follow EU rules that we have no say over. Because that's economic gravity, and someone should point that out; if we're going to have to be rule-taking, then ok; but that's why we want a seat at the table. That's what the way back in is about, responding to Jackie's point about addressing the economic woes, because this is becoming a middle-income country. We're going to be a middle-income country with a first-world capital.

What my last chapter of the book says, Paul, is, if that we accept everything that Starmer's folk are saying, we need to be honest about where it leads us. And it doesn't lead us to the land of milk and honey and closer relationship with Europe and it'll all be fine. It doesn't help the car industry and the factories. It's not going to get people to build battery factories in the UK. So if that's our position, if that's our choice, then we'd better have a really serious think about planning about skills, about why anybody would invest in this country, because we're not even having that conversation.

Richard Corbett: Thank you, Peter. I think that was an excellent way of winding up this discussion. It's another plea to be more vociferous, more clear, more courageous in speaking out and taking on those issues, those misconceptions, spelling them out and getting greater understanding. And also I think it's a plea for Labour's position to be more courageous sooner rather than later.

Peter Foster: I intend to keep banging on about this, obviously, when the book comes out.

Laura Parker: Be absolutely vociferous everybody, but perhaps understand that you may shift public opinion before you shift the party. But that's fine, because you can get to the party by the public. So definitely, I'm 100% with you, Richard.

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Campaign Asks – please see separate notes.

Fiona Godfrey and Jane Golding (Co-Chairs, British in Europe) presented the results of a 2023 survey of UK citizens abroad on exercising their voting rights as overseas electors. A public version of the presentation is being circulated with this report.

Participants

Chair:

Richard Corbett EM-UK

Speakers:

Peter Foster (Financial Times)

Laura Parker (Labour for a Future Democracy)

Jackie Jones (Wales for Europe)

Attendees:

Ceira Casey Sergeant (Stay European)

Peter Corr (NRM)
John Gaskell (GfE)
Fiona Godfrey (British in Europe)
Jane Golding (British in Europe)
Else Kvist (The New Europeans)
Sharon Leclercq-Spooner (ProEuropa)
Richard Morris (EM-UK)
Andrew Plant (EM-UK)
Andy Pye (London for Europe)
Tamsin Shasha (Festival of Europe)
Seema Syeda (Another Europe is Possible)
Rosemary Watt (GlasgowLovesEU)
Magdalena Williams (GfE)
Richard Wilson (EM-UK)
Sue Wilson (Bremain in Spain)
Dr Ruvi Ziegler (The New Europeans)

RT team:

Colin Gordon
Helen Grogan
Jonathan Harris
Tony McCobb
Lilian McCobb
Jo Pye
Paul Willner

Date of Next Meeting:

Round Table #39 – Tuesday September 5th - 5pm-6:30pm

Topic [to be confirmed with details]: Online Safety and Freedoms in UK and EU

Forthcoming Grassroots for Europe Webinar

Wednesday September 13th, 6pm - 7:15pm via Zoom.

“What Went Wrong with Brexit? - Peter Foster in conversation with Alex Hall Hall”,
discussing his new book, **What Went Wrong With Brexit (and What We Can Do About It?)**
(Canongate, September 7th).

Open to all, admission free. Registration:

<https://www.tickettailor.com/events/grassrootsforeurope1/970098>