

What went wrong with Brexit? Peter Foster in conversation with Alex Hall Hall

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Alex Hall Hall

Welcome, everybody. We need to talk more honestly about Brexit. And reading Peter's book drove my blood pressure up, because it reminded me of all the completely daft and stupid ways in which we screwed up Brexit and the consequences. I'm not going to make any pretense that I do not think Brexit was a good idea. I think Peter and his book, however, removes the emotion and talks in a very pragmatic way about how we got here, and what the consequences have been. But there is light at the end of the tunnel, because the best part of his book, which I will spend most of this interview teasing out, is what do we do about it? How do we move forward from here? How do we try and detoxify the subject, remove the ideology, remove the bitterness, and find a pragmatic way forward that helps mitigate some of the effects of Brexit?

So I'm really thrilled to have Peter here. My first question is why aren't there more journalists like you? Because one of the things that's really concerned me about Brexit is the lack of really good serious analysis in the British papers. And how did we get here? Because understanding what was the mindset in the UK and all the different actors and all the different players that led us down this road and into this form of Brexit is hopefully what will help us say, Well, okay, so how do we move forward from that? So Peter, what was it about the UK mindset that not just prompted people to vote for it, but ended up with the kind of Brexit which we got? Was their exceptionalism part of the issue?

Peter Foster

So the first answer to that question is that Brexit didn't come out the blue. Brexit came as a result of 40 years of negative narratives about the European Union, most of which turn a lot of truth about the European Union on its head. For example, the narrative that we have been shackled to a corpse by joining the single market. In truth, if you read, the work of Nicolas Crafts at Warwick University, it's very clear that membership of the single market made the UK economy more competitive by exposing us to competition: with advanced economies on our doorstep, it increased growth and productivity in the UK economy. When the 2016 referendum came along, most of the narratives about the European Union, European Union membership were negative. They were about bendy bananas, they were about emasculation, they were about red tape. No one on this call, I suspect needs reminding of the irony of the fact that all that red tape is now red, white and blue tape and in spades. And this brings me to the second part of the question, there is a reason why we voted to leave the European Union. And there is a reason why the remain campaign absolutely failed to make an emotional case for remaining in the European Union, for remaining part of our neighbourhood, for retaining our ability to live and work and travel in our neighbourhood. They didn't dare make the case, because it was a politically toxic and suicidal thing to do. And that tells you all you need to know about why we left and why we ended up with the Brexit that we did.

To answer your very first question, why is there not any serious analysis about Brexit: one of the reasons is that it's become a politically inert subject. I think, actually, the reason this book was commissioned is a sense that the polls are changing. A new government is on the way, a window is opening for conversation. For most of the last three or four years, while people like me have been patiently reporting on the real-world impact of Brexit on those who move things and make things, from a news editor's perspective, what's the point? In an information economy, when both main political parties are committed to not talking about it, what's the point? And I think a lot of the public actually felt that way.

As we've gone into the cost of living crisis and economic crisis, there has been more interest and more willingness to talk about it. The polls suggest that people have a sense that Brexit has been responsible for deepening the cost of living crisis for deepening the UK productivity and investment crisis. And therefore, one of the reasons I wrote the first part of the book is to try and crystallize, Alex, that even Brexiteers have a sense that it's not going very well, but they often don't really understand why mechanically, that's the case. So that's why I wrote the first half of the book, but it's also why we shouldn't be surprised that no one's talking about it.

Alex Hall Hall

That's very helpful. So for the people listening, the book is in three main parts. First how did we get here? Next, what are the real-world impacts, and it is a remorseless chapter after chapter of all the different ways it's affected us economically, politically, the culture, industry, immigration, labour, the fabric of the Union. And then the last third is how do we move on from here? So it's a very logical book.

I want to pick up on the point that even Brexiteers are understanding it's not going well, even if they don't quite know why. I understand that many regular folk who haven't steeped themselves in politics and who have been fed a diet of distorted reading by the media may not have fully understood the full impact of Brexit. But I can't understand that of politicians, either politicians who've worked very closely with the EU, or who have campaigned against it, yet without ever appearing to understand how it worked. In Theresa May's very first major keynote speech for the Conservative Party conference after she's made Prime Minister, she sets out positions on leaving the EU that automatically end freedom of movement and make it impossible for us to stay in the Customs Union and the single market. And yet she apparently doesn't seem to understand the implications of her positions. How could British politicians have been so massively ignorant. Is it really ignorance? Is it willful blindness? And then even as the Brexit negotiations went on, as a civil servant I can tell you that civil servants brief ministers on the consequences or the implications of their policy choices. So how could they have kept on claiming things that weren't true? Or believing them?

Peter Foster

One reason is that they failed to transition. You will remember this as a former civil servant, Alex, they failed to transition out of membership mentality. So Theresa May, when she was home secretary, chose which bits of the justice and home affairs legislation she could opt in and opt out of. That was one of nice halfway houses we had in our cherry picking membership of the European Union. And when she became prime minister, she never really got out of that mindset.

If you go back to David Cameron's interactions with Europe, to his attempt to block the December 2011 inter-governmental treaty on Eurozone fiscal targets when the Eurozone was in crisis, Cameron went to Sarkozy in Paris and told him that he wanted all these concessions. He lost. His renegotiation before the Brexit referendum was still based on this idea that we always get what we want out of Europe in the end. Well, actually, we didn't. But that mentality meant that politicians were endlessly adept at convincing themselves that the EU would show flexibility. Actually, when we were members, they didn't show us nearly as much flexibility as we'd like to think. But when we were non-members, and the whole basis of the single market was under threat, from the migration crisis, from the election of Donald Trump, we absolutely failed to grasp the extent to which the European side had circled the wagons to defend the integrity of the four freedoms of the single market.

And we didn't want to know. You remember the Chequers negotiation where British political correspondents came out and said, We've got a deal? We hadn't got a deal. All we had managed to do was find a triangulation that lasted all of 48 hours between members of a deeply divided cabinet. We spent so much of the time negotiating with ourselves. You remember, you were there. And so, if Theresa May stopped and thought about it, she probably did understand on paper, and then she waved it away, Oh, no, no, we're a strategic ally, we're on their doorstep. All the way through the Northern Ireland process, when Dublin was digging in, and Merkel was digging in on the question of the Irish border, there were no unicorns and no magic solutions.

And so I think that when you ally the failure to realize it was going to be different when we were out, alongside these deep-seated fallacies that the Tory party clung on to and still cling on to about the sclerotic nature of Europe, and how we'd be better off out better off on our own, you can understand where we got to. Even after all the lived experience, Jacob Rees-Mogg was running around telling the House of Commons that the Retained EU Law Bill, this idea that we rip up all EU-derived law by the end of the year that we don't want to save, would deliver a productivity boost to the British economy. Well, as a Financial Times reporter, I spend an awful lot of time phoning economists, and I couldn't find one who thought that creating separate regulatory environments within the EU and the UK, and deregulating, was going to create a net productivity boost to the UK. But it's so deeply embedded in the Tory narrative on Brexit, on Europe rather, that when we got there, and even to this day, they didn't manage to make the leap to being out. And so you could call it cynicism.

David Frost gave speeches about the value of the single market when he was chairman of the Scots Whisky Association, but at some level they'd sold this prospectus for Brexit, and they clung on to it very hard, even in the face, of course, of the mounting facts. I think the public at some level have realized that a lot of what they were promised in terms of having our cake and eating it isn't going to be delivered. Boris Johnson on Christmas Eve 2020 said that the reverse trade deal he'd done with Europe, erecting barriers, not taking them away, was going to allow the United Kingdom if anything, to do more trade with Europe, not less. Well, you don't need a GCSE in trade economics to know that that's clearly phooey. I'm not in their minds, I'm not going to make aspersions about what they did or didn't believe. But I think they clung to comforting narratives about Europe and their ability to negotiate with Europe that weren't based in fact.

Alex Hall Hall

Thinking about how we get out of this fact-free debate and to being able to accept reality, your point about clinging to comforting narratives is quite interesting. They've gone down a tunnel, and when the facts haven't aligned with their beliefs, they haven't changed their beliefs, they've looked for people to blame. So it's because Brexit hasn't been delivered properly, or the EU tricked us or they're punishing us or the civil service secretly undermined it. We haven't got a proper Brexit, or the remainers in the House of Commons or the judges thwarted us. There's a cognitive dissonance going on, within some of those who supported Brexit, because the evidence is mounting that things aren't working as they should have been, but instead of adjusting their views to take account of new facts, they're just looking for people to blame. Does that sound right to you?

Peter Foster

And you know, we all do that. I think there's also, and I say this in the nicest possible way, quite a lot of laziness, in our politics, in our journalism, in our willingness to pick up the phone and ask people, and listen to them, about how the world works. And I think we took the single market for granted, it was like the air we breathed. And, of course, it wasn't, it was founded on a whole load of sovereignty trade-offs, a whole load of accepting that we would be part of a single jurisdiction for the regulation and movement of goods, services, capital and people. That's surely what's behind Theresa Mays, dreadful opening speech. I think Ivan Rogers said it was the worst speech ever given by a British prime minister, and we're still some way, I think, from getting back there. That's why I've written the book, and why I'm glad you said it was written in quite forensic dispassionate terms.

I'm not naive, I don't think loads of Brexiteers, Dan Hannan types, are going to run out and buy this book and go, gosh, you know, we all made a terrible mistake, let's rejoin the EU. But what I hope is that people will buy this book and will press it into the hands of people who are somewhere in the middle ground, and say: this is an attempt just to lay out, in a pretty forensic, chilly way, why this doesn't work. It's not that it's not been applied properly, it's that structurally, creating barriers to trade with your largest market creates embedded uncertainty in the regulatory environment that deters investors. Investors want to look into the horizon 10-15 years hence, and see that yes, there will be political cycles, there will be turns of the wheel, but fundamentally, that will be a fact-based, legally sound policy environment that will allow them to invest and to export and to engage with the neighbourhood. And Brexit breaks that, even handled well. And arguably, this government is being much more sensible than previous governments.

Brexit creates an ongoing structural impediment to investment and to sound policymaking. In the initial phases, the Truss Johnson years, we saw incredible turbulence where, essentially, they were just clinging to the reality in the face of F business, as the Prime Minister said. But I think now we're going to move into a slightly more grinding phase, and my worry is that what we're going to see is the application of localized and strategic anesthetic to the problem, that is going to disguise the problem, and that it will become chronic and not acute. And in that wonderful phrase, the British frog will get boiled, a slow puncture. And actually, there won't be a great wake up moment.

And that's why I think this is quite an important moment for a national conversation as we approach, according to the polls, the very high likelihood of a Labour government. Communities like this need to make their voices heard, because current polls show that people who are going to vote Labour are 70%

pro-EU. You can say pro-rejoin, but I just wonder what would happen when we get into the nuts and bolts of rejoining. And anyway, I think that's a long way off as far as Brussels is concerned. But there is a conversation to be had, there is a moment here. And I'm not at all confident what the outcome of that moment will be. But the vainglorious hope is that this book is trying to inform that conversation. It's 170 pages, it's not a long read. I'm a journalist, I'm not an academic: it's not full of footnotes, and unwieldy indexes, and anyone who could read a newspaper article could read this book, in an afternoon, pretty much. And so, whether it's via my book or via organizations like this, we need to be having this conversation, so that when the politics unblocks, which it will, to a greater or lesser degree, we're having a fact-based conversation about the way forward.

Alex Hall Hall

You make that point, somewhere near the end of your book, about the need to take action now, for fear of this becoming a permanent, entrenched condition. There's a sense of urgency that does come through in your writing. You're dispassionate, you're very clinical, and it's very fact-based. It's a very powerful, evidential case that you lay out, but at the end, that sense of urgency does come through, I want to ask you one more question about the mindset and the context before I turn to how we move on from this. You talk about there being a climate of silence and businesses not speaking out sufficiently clearly. Now, I was in Washington at the time of Donald Trump's presidency when he applied steel tariffs. And a lot of businesses were very unhappy about that. And I remember asking some Chamber of Commerce businessmen and women in the US, why aren't you more vocal about it? And they said, actually, they were just afraid that if they criticize the president, he would boycott their business or make life uncomfortable for them. I remember the CEO of Harley Davidson criticized something, and immediately, Trump tweeted some hostile things about Harley Davidson. And they also said they were afraid of their own workers, many of whom supported Trump. So businesses in the US were not speaking out about some of the negative impacts of Donald Trump's trade policies. What was the situation in the UK? Why weren't more businesses, whose lifeblood dependent upon just in time supply chains with the EU, speaking out?

Peter Foster

Well, when you ask them that question, you get two answers. One is, they were scarred by the Scottish referendum. In a 50-50 split, which is what that vote was, give or take, and the Brexit vote was, give or take, half your clients, half your consumers, and half your workforce on the shop floor are going to be split one way or the other. And therefore, any line you take is going to upset somebody and businesses don't like to upset people. Secondly, you mentioned Trump tweeting, but in a world of client politics and populist politics, we have seen that politicians are prepared to be very capricious, and very aggressive. And the Prime Minister said F business. So if you don't think you're actually going to get anywhere, and you've been into all sorts of private meetings in Whitehall and you've been butting your head against ministers who simply don't want to hear any uncomfortable truths, then you're a doomster and a declinist, and you wonder, well, what's the point? And so they didn't.

I do still wonder what would have happened if, during the referendum campaign, which was so passive on the remain side, some of the really big beast household names, who people do listen to, whether it's Tesco, or John Lewis, or the Nationwide Building Society, or Barclays Bank, or Ford Motor, the trusted brands, had come out and said it's obviously up to everyone how they vote, but be under no illusion,

from those of us that move things and make things, this is going to make us poorer. Because people don't vote for a darker future. At some level, they were voting for a brighter future, buccaneering Britain freed from the clutches of the corporate, corporatist European Union, Britain unemasculated, Independence Day Farage said. And, of course, it became such a seductive narrative that essentially, corporate Britain lost its nerve, I'm not entirely surprised that they did. And I'm sure there were lots of highly paid consultants and focus groups telling them, keep your trap shut. And I think the other thing, lest we forget, is that there was an enormous amount of complacency. Cameron thought he was going to win. Big business thought that in the end, the incumbency factor would take over as it had in Scotland. People vote for the status quo. There were all sorts of academic studies, I remember, about the status quo swing in referendums all over the world. So if you were the CEO of a business, why would you put your head above the parapet if all things being equal, nasty and divisive fight that it was, we were all going to wake up on June the 24th, to find that we've not left. And we can all put it behind us and move on. And of course, that's not what happened.

Alex Hall Hall

No. But when I think back to that time, it seems that the loudest business voices, or the ones that seemed to get traction were the fellow who runs the pub chain Wetherspoons, and Dyson. I don't recall people like Richard Branson, or John Lewis, or some of those other trusted household names speaking out. But even after we'd voted, and the referendum had gone the way that it did, I just didn't see business gearing up differently.

Peter Foster

But businesses are instinctively apolitical. Unless your business has an obvious political bent, most of the advice would be stay out of it: all you end up doing is alienating one or the other. And I can completely see why that was the case. And then once it had happened, the ship had sailed. And many businesses hid behind organizations like the CBI. Well, I'm sure you remember from your time in government, Alex, they got a kicking, and it was too late by then.

Alex Hall Hall

All right, let's move to what do we do about this? The title of your book is What Went Wrong with Brexit, which implies that something could have gone right. And yet, the evidence of your book points to the real difficulty of delivering Brexit in a way that would have avoided all these costs. And we have a Labour opposition that is already setting out red lines on the Customs Union, single market and freedom of movement and saying they will make Brexit work. In the last part of your book, you talk about rejoin, resign or rethink, and you have plumped for the rethink. Why have you ruled out rejoin as an option? And why have you focused your recommendations on pragmatic ways to try and make it work within the parameters set down by the Labour Party?

Peter Foster

So there's a number of things here. If I called the book Brexit Was Doomed from the Outset, and We're All Going to Die, it would have completely alienated everybody. So I make two arguments in the book. One is that Brexit, insofar as it has currently been defined, should not be the monopoly of a few people like David Frost and Boris Johnson. We have to get past the fact that any kind of recalibration of Brexit by a future government is a betrayal of some mythical Brexit that never existed. This betrayal narrative

has to be squashed. And we need political leadership to say, actually, you were conned by that version of Brexit; I don't want to go back; we're not going to rejoin; but we have to rethink. I could have written a book, called *Why We Should Rejoin the European Union*. If you could wave a magic wand, everybody on this call, I imagine, would rather we were back in the European Union. It wouldn't surprise you to hear that. If we could wave a magic wand and go back in time, I think we'd be better off inside the European Union. But when both main political parties are committed to not rejoining the European Union, I didn't see the value. I discussed with my publisher just building a castle in the air of all the reasons we should rejoin. But it isn't happening in the near future. And so, I then set myself the exercise, what can we do within the parameters of where the current political parties are? And there, I think you get into a more interesting space, which is not as much as they're pretending. The Labour Party likes to make big promises about the recognition of professional qualifications. Well, there's a provision for that in the Canada-EU deal, CETA, and it took nine rounds of negotiations to do one deal on architects. That isn't going to change the price of fish.

I have been asked, Isn't your book actually making an overwhelming case for rejoining? Well, you might say that, I couldn't possibly comment. What I'm saying is, my job as a journalist is to show not tell. If you read my book and you're a remainer, you might think, blimey, that's the overwhelming case for remain right there. If you were a big brexiteer, you might read my book and think that is a surrender document: he's recommending that we align ourselves with Brussels; we sell our sovereignty down the road to Brussels; we make ourselves an absolutely impossible rule taker on huge aspects of our life; it's unconscionable. But while those are both arguments that can be made, what I'd say to the brexiteer is what's the alternative? And what I want is reasoned, cogent arguments, not just saying, well, we can't predict the future. Actually, if you erect non-tariff barriers to trade with the market where you do half your trade, you can predict that's going to be bad for your trade. You might argue that trade deals with the Trans-Pacific Group or Australia, or maybe a shallow deal with India, are going to offset the cost of hobbling our trade with Europe, but I don't know any serious economists who want to make that case. If you are going to make a case about deregulation, well, we're now three or four years into the Brexit deal, and actually, business has been overwhelmingly against deregulation. It hasn't delivered the dividends: in fact, it delivers, a lot of complexity, it retards investment. There are increasing amounts of research from Bank of England economists about what it's done to investment; another paper came out just this week. And so, let's have a reasoned argument about what is the business case for staying out? I don't mind if people read the book and say, he's mad, this is total nonsense, what we need is ... But what that response needs to be based on is a really serious business case. Because that's not what's happened so far.

Alex Hall Hall

I want to push you a little bit on this, because it seems to me, it's all about the mindset and the way our domestic politics is working at the moment. I think you're right, your book is so logical. When you actually do a cost benefit, and you weigh up, is it in our interests to diverge here, or which regulations does it make more sense to be aligned, if you take the passion out of it, you remove the toxicity, you just look logically, it points the way. But that's what's been missing in the UK political debate. And I know that if Labour do anything that appears to look as if they're trying to restore cooperation or commit to certain things, the opposition is just going to accuse them of surrender or a sellout or a betrayal. How

do we take this toxicity out? Where is that political leadership's going to come from that says, No, you've been conned, I'm focusing on this in a very pragmatic way.

Peter Foster

Well, you know, I don't have an answer to that, Alex. And I'm not brim full of optimism, truthfully, because, as I was saying at the start, of the depth of the negative narrative. I haven't seen great evidence of political courage of that kind among the current Labour front bench. Maybe after the election, it will be different. One of the things I say in the book, in order to try and detoxify the narrative, is that we need to look at what delivers the higher-paying higher-value jobs. Advanced manufacturing, which is one of the sector's most hit by Brexit, delivers on average the higher-paying high-value jobs in the Midlands and the North and the Northeast. We need to argue about where our strategic alliances lie, in a world where US and China are decoupling where America is definitely pivoting away from Europe. We need to ask where we share goals with Europe on energy security on energy distribution, on net zero, on Ukraine, and make the case for the neighbourhood. And guess what? You're right. I suspect there will be an awful lot of howling from the pro-Brexit press.

But we saw, for example, with the Windsor framework, didn't we? A lot of people, including, in fact, myself, were very fearful that when Sunak proposed the Windsor framework, he'd be ripped to shreds by the right of his party. And guess what? It came, it went, it was a pragmatic deal. And the sky didn't fall in. And I think Keir Starmer, if it is Keir Starmer, is going to have to show some courage when he meets those attacks from the right wing, pro-Brexit press. He's going to have to say: let's not pretend I'm betraying Brexit. I'm not going back into the EU. We're not rejoining. I've already said that. But that cannot be the same as saying we're not going to have a practical rethink, to fix some of the things that need fixing, because I need to deliver economic growth, I need to deliver jobs. I need to make the car industry in the electric vehicle world sustainable. We'll do that, and I'm not going to be shouted down.

I'm a policy reporter, I am not a political reporter, and I'm sure there will be lots of people who will just say That's madness. But I go back to the fact that the Labour electorate is on paper, pro-EU in broad terms. And whilst I think it's naive to think there's going to be a massive rah, rah case for Europe and rejoining, there has to be a case for constructive engagement with our neighbourhood. And I can't believe it's beyond the capability of a newly elected prime minister, with a reasonable result in an election to make that case. I don't know, I'm not a political reporter, I'm not on the Labour front bench. But it may actually be they decide that the incremental economic gains that will come from tinkering with the trade and cooperation agreement are not worth the political headache. With massive fiscal constraints at the moment, Starmer's going to inherit a country in lots of ways on its knees. Does he want to pick a fight on Europe? There will be members of the Shadow Cabinet, I suspect, who will be saying no, because maybe you won't get what you want out of Brussels anyway.

Alex Hall Hall

It may be that they have to do a sleight of hand, like Sunak presented the Windsor framework as some amazing new breakthrough, or rejoining horizon meant we had somehow joined this new scheme on better terms, whereas actually, all we've done is caught back up with where we were a few years ago, but you have to present it in a sleight of hand way. One of the issues that's come up quite a lot, is that while there may be a changing sentiment that maybe Brexit hasn't gone as well as we thought it would,

and that actually, we should rebuild cooperation with the EU, Brexit per se, and the EU per se, are not high on voters' priorities: there are more immediate things like cost of living or inflation, or schools or the NHS. And it seems to me that the way through this is for Labour to not make it about the EU, but about what makes sense if we're concerned about the NHS or the creative industries. So - and I think you make the point in your book as well - it's not about do we surrender sovereignty to Brussels, or compromise and go back cap in hand to Brussels, it's what's actually in our national interest, and how do we fix these problems. And if Labour kicks it to the second term, they also will be tackling the economy with one hand behind their back.

Peter Foster

So to the point about half lives in a relationship, I don't know where we'll be in five years time, at the end of a Labour government's first term, if that's what we get. But I think we definitely don't want to be nowhere. Relationships, commercial, diplomatic, etc. have a half life. Most people don't have the appetite to fight Brexit anymore. That's a double-edged sword: it means that incremental change, like Horizon or Erasmus are more possible than many feared, but it also means that getting people worked up enough about Brexit to re-enter the fray to rejoin is difficult. But I do think that if, as you said, Alex, you link it to the cost of living crisis to attract investment, to tackling the UK productivity crisis, to delivering better for people who were nominally supposed to be the beneficiaries of Brexit, then you create a platform by which you can start to mend some of the damage done by Brexit. But I don't think there are any magic bullets here. We need to accept that, but that is not a counsel either of despair, or of doing nothing.

I think actually, there needs to be grassroots desire not to re-litigate the thing. We ended up with a very hard Brexit because the Labour Party and other remainers didn't back Theresa May's single market for goods deal. And I remember getting absolutely monstered on Twitter by remainers for suggesting that Theresa May's deal was a perfectly reasonable halfway house. Brexit derangement syndrome, which Dan Hannan accused me of, worked in both directions, and the middle ground got lost, which perhaps wasn't that surprising, given the nature of British politics. And frankly, the decades of enmity on this subject, out of which Brexit was born. Cameron had a referendum, because he thought he couldn't avoid having one because the issue was burning up the Tory party. People forget quite how toxic it was.

Alex Hall Hall

Will the EU be open to us sort of seeking to change? In your book, you say we're really going to have to work hard to make it in their interests, because they've moved on.

Peter Foster

No! I was at an event last night in London, with a couple of senior European diplomats. And no, is the short answer. But let me qualify that. The fact is that the EU has moved on, they've got a deal, which doesn't, frankly, do them that much damage. And that means that they're not that interested in engaging at the moment, partly because they can see we have a government that is politically unable to engage in any deep and substantive way beyond a few fixes. On Horizon, for example, the low hanging fruit is now done; the Windsor framework, thanks, we got that tick. And we have an opposition that is committed to the same red lines that created Boris Johnson's deal on the single market and the

Customs Union, whilst promising it's going to deliver a lot more than it is, which makes the EU defensive. So I think there is an awful lot of fatigue. There are a lot of other things to worry about, if you're in the European Union: managing the accession of Ukraine, European expansion, energy security, Russia, strategic shift on defense ... Do they want to be dealing with a UK that is still the source of large amounts of distrust, which predate Brexit? We were troublesome, even when we were a member. So from a European side, are you going to want to get into a serious, substantive negotiation, when you're not that sure whether four or five years from now you're going to have a Trumpian Tory party in office?

But that again, is not a counsel of despair. I do think that a new prime minister, who has not got the baggage that the current party has, will get traction if they go to European capitals, and to Brussels, and make it clear that they want a substantively different relationship than the one that Boris Johnson and David Frost negotiated, and are prepared to put things on the table that would make that so, and that is partly strategic. It's partly about energy. It's partly about linking our carbon markets and sequestering European carbon in in North Sea oil wells. It's about sharing strategic issues on defense. It's about creating a level playing field on areas of mutual interest that were eschewed by Johnson and Frost. Erasmus and mobility are other things that we do have to offer. Using that as a platform to say to the EU, we want a deep and strategic partnership. Now that doesn't mean that, on the first visit to Brussels or to Paris, Starmer gets everything he wants, or we get back into another enormous negotiation. I think it's a long road, but I do think we have to start it. And that's not going to be easy, because it's going to require a level of rule taking in some instances, it's going to be a slow journey, it's not going to turn around overnight. Even if we went back and said, We want to rejoin. I don't think that happens overnight.

Alex Hall Hall

Everything you've said, points to me that we need to get our own house in order first. And then if we're serious, and engage in good faith, and bring things to the table, we may get traction on the EU side. But if we think we can just cherry pick now, it's not going to happen.

One final question: What can we do? What can ordinary punters like me do to help? How do we engage? How do we encourage Labour? How do we detoxify the issue? I think someone said we have to resist the temptation to just shout We told you so! How do we help rebuild bridges?

Peter Foster

Exactly: resist the temptation to say I told you so, and anchor, the positive changes that we all seek on the ability to trade, etc, in the practical desire to make our neighbourhood relationship better. Don't even use the Brexit word, and make it clear to embolden politicians, MPs, etc. with a fact-based case. Buy the book, give it to them.

Alex Hall Hall

Buy the book and send it to your MP!

Peter Foster

I'm being facetious. Obviously, what I'm saying is that what I'm trying to do is drag the discussion into a space where more people understand the simple, practical difficulties that are created by Brexit, by the single market, by future regulations coming in carbon border taxes for businesses, new digital biometric borders, etc. There will be pressure points there on the tracks. Use them to make the case for reengagement for our own good.

[There followed 15 minutes of Q&A, which is included in the recording of the webinar.]

Alex Hall Hall

We're out of time. Thank you so much, Peter. Thank you so much, everyone for the brilliant questions. Paul, over to you.

Paul Willner

And thank you, Alex, for running the interview so engagingly and competently. Peter, I think your book is an absolute tour de force in both your analysis of, of the harms of Brexit, and your description and analysis of the mitigations that are possible. I hope it's very well widely read. I hope everyone here buys it, and buys copies for their parents and grandchildren. To both of you, thank you so much, and thank you to everyone who has asked questions. And, Peter, when I asked you about single market, I think you've put your finger on a critical issue, that what lies below the strange position that the Labour Party is taking may be some fears around freedom of movement. So you will want to know that the next Grassroots for Europe webinar, on November 8th, will be on freedom of movement. We have an excellent line-up to analyze that issue. I hope to see you all there. Thank you all very much. Good night.