



Summary Report of Grassroots for Europe Round Table #40: “Covering the Island / Turn again, Starmer”

Tuesday October 3rd, 2023.

Session theme and context

In this session we had two exceptionally interesting guests, speaking on two hot topics for pro-EU people: how the UK is seen by our fellow Europeans, and the state of play in Labour's EU policy.

They were the senior correspondent of ARD German television in London since 2008, **Annette Dittert**, and journalist, political economist and writer (and old friend of the RT) **Will Hutton**.

The perception by Europeans of the UK, its stability, its democratic culture and its reliability as an international partner is by common consent likely to be a key constraint on the UK's future economic prospects and political options. A better UK-EU dialogue and restored trust is now on the wish list of all the major parties – a key part of which has to involve listening to our European friends and hearing how they see us. Annette Dittert has been an astute, sympathetic but uncompromising observer and key explainer of our strange island for the German public throughout the years of Brexit. What can we learn from our friends?

Will Hutton, a doyen of UK political criticism, author of *The State We're In* and 15 other books, columnist and former editor-in-chief of the *Observer*, spoke about his new book, *This Time No Mistakes: What the Right Did to Britain and How to Fix It*; and in the run-up to Labour's conference, we asked whether this is an inflexion moment in Labour's Brexit policy – as Starmer, in the words of our recent guest Peter Foster in the *Financial Times*, “comes under pressure to pink those red lines”. How can pro-Europeans add to that pressure?

Annette Dittert [ARD tv]

Annette opened by saying that she speaks as a sympathetic observer, living in the UK and suffering the effects of Brexit. She had just returned from reporting on the Conservative conference. Referring to her article of two or three years ago at the start of post-truth, lies and undermining of the rule of law, she said the present situation, although expected, is shockingly far worse. The Tories are clearly moving to the far right, as evidenced by Suella Braverman's evermore divisive speech in which the Home Secretary claimed that liberal attitudes to migration are nothing more than luxury beliefs. Other conference speakers at fringe events underlined this move to the right, with the solitary exception of David Gauke. This depressing situation means that should the Tories lose the General Election, as suggested by opinion polls, they may move even further to the right. This is very worrying as the country needs a centre-right. Other than contributing articles to a recently published book by David Gauke (see footnote) none of those purged from the party in 2019 are now prominent in a Conservative party where the loudest voices are now the farthest to the right. This is particularly worrying as Labour will be in a very difficult position if they win the General Election with a press which is mostly pro-Tory and unlikely to support Labour.

Following a long period of grief, especially in Germany, the attitude towards the UK within Europe is generally one of disinterest. Articles about Britain submitted to the German press receive little interest. Previously, when the UK was an EU member, reports from the Conservative Conference would have attracted significant attention in the German media, but this is no longer the case. From a political angle, people in Brussels are still extremely sceptical. Clearly, they are waiting to see the outcome of the General Election, but that may not come for another year – a very long time in British politics. Starmer is promising very little which would make a difference economically. Although the hopes of closer alignment which Starmer is cautiously raising are understandable politically, they are slightly false. Talk of a TCA review in 2025 does not mean a renegotiation of the original deal as implied by the British media. The review is purely a tactical assessment where the UK will be represented by a few high-level civil servants with no room for re-negotiation. It is unlikely that Starmer will be able to renegotiate during a Labour first term. The only hope for Remainers is that political expediency means that Starmer is saying one thing whilst

aiming for a different position once in power. This is not a very reassuring position for the political culture in Britain. At present it is difficult to say whether there is some hope of future realignment or of rejoining. The priorities for Europe are the War in Ukraine, and the political situation in other Eastern European countries. If Kaczynski and the far-right nationalists win a third term in the upcoming Polish elections, this will mean Poland is no longer a democracy with so much having already been destroyed there. There are other problems with the EU, with Italy being ruled by a far-right party and serious uncertainty about the outcome of the next French presidential election. With the EU being an unstable entity at present, the UK is far from being a priority. However, the instability within Europe may result in a different situation where, for example, there are various tiers of joining and a way back for the UK. Without being overly pessimistic, it is difficult to see an immediate path to rejoining, given both the political situation in the UK and the very pressing concerns facing the EU.

Gauke, David et al, *The Case for the Centre Right*, (September 2023).

Including articles by Rory Stewart, Michael Heseltine, Dominic Grieve, Daniel Finkelstein, Gavin Barwell, Amber Rudd, Andrew Cooper, Anne Milton Sam Gyimah, Tim Pitt.

Will Hutton

Will Hutton's forthcoming book, *This Time No Mistakes: What the Right Did to Britain and How to Fix It*, formed the background to his talk on whether the Labour Conference would signal an 'inflexion moment', now or later, in Labour's Brexit policy.

Will Hutton thinks that Thatcherism's profound scarring of the Midlands and the North led in many ways to the Brexit vote, which in right-wing circles is seen as a massively overdone celebration of her standing. One of Thatcher's failures was not following the Norwegians in creating a sovereign wealth fund in Britain, which could have created a \$1.5 trillion fund for the kind of economy and society Starmer might have inherited if he wins the next general election. Instead, the UK is in a corner with its debt-servicing as a proportion of GDP, its international accounts, and poor levels of investment. In addition to this weak inheritance is the knowledge that most of our media allow the Tories to say more or less what they like about Sadiq Khan, antisemitism or Starmer's beliefs. Many incendiary

statements at the Tory Conference in Manchester may even seem to be stoking a sort of revolution. As Churchill said, something can go round the world twice before the truth catches up with it.

Starmer's task is to reinvent our political culture, give ourselves the state apparatus necessary to generate good economic growth and repair our society. That would make the UK a very attractive prospect for many of our European colleagues. So what are Starmer, Rachel Reeves and David Lammy really thinking, as opposed to what the Tories say about them?

Firstly, Starmer is acutely aware of the electoral mountain he has to climb: even replicating Tony Blair's 1997 swing would provide a majority of just one.

Secondly, our powerful right-wing media ecosystem has already begun the next election campaign. *The Times* has now decided to affiliate with the *Express*, *Mail*, *Sun* and *Telegraph*, thus setting the narrative for well over half of our newspaper readership. A Labour Party leader can't help but be aware of that.

Thirdly, the Conservative Party's lurch to the right is not extraordinary, but a natural development. Braverman's speeches, instinctively stoking division and condemning multiculturalism, indicate she is taking the party further to the right than Sunak or even Badenoch. By using her 'brownness' to say things a white politician wouldn't dare to say, Braverman comes flagrantly close to toppling from her tightrope into racism. She exploits polling evidence about immigration, asylum seekers, and small boats. Yvette Cooper and Keir Starmer have to navigate all that very carefully.

On a slightly more optimistic note, it is unfair to think Starmer has suddenly become a paid up Eurosceptic, or that he does not regret Brexit. But in our right-wing ecosystem, and recognising that a 1997 type of swing will give a majority of just one, extreme caution is required. However, he recently showed some bravery in his trip to Europol with Yvette Cooper and his subsequent trip to Paris, and in trying to fashion better control of migration and asylum-seeking through collaboration with Europol and the French government. A kind of bravery overcame extreme caution, and the Tory pushback was not as damaging as it might have been. *Sky* and others alleged that Starmer spoke secretly with other liberal leaders in Canada, whereas the remarks and interview were live-streamed. Starmer has been quite open about not wanting to diverge from the EU on worker rights or

environmental standards. These bolder lines from Starmer are very different from only a few months ago. Polls showing Britons regretting Brexit by 62% to 38% also mean that Tory attacks have less resonance. The visit to Macron is also an optimistic straw in the wind, as Macron will have raised the issue of a new framework of associate membership of the EU, as well as seeing Starmer as a Prime Minister in waiting. Furthermore, even our very right-wing British government is anxious to host the next meeting of the European policy community, mainly to get immigration onto the agenda. Starmer knows that as the second biggest exporter of services in the world, access to the single market is impossible without committing to freedom of movement, And I think he would probably have no problem accepting the European regulatory framework in key industries like aerospace, chemicals, fertilisers. David Lammy also recently made a little-noticed point that “remaining outside the room” would produce an increasingly heavy cost to the UK just when the EU is massively increasing support to Ukraine with decisions about sanctions, military backup and training. A Trump victory or a very strong Republican Congress would inevitably increase the necessity of standing with Europe to support Ukraine. To these shifting patterns we can add the British public’s recognition that leaving the European Union was a deception and the growing evidence of the economic damage it has caused. Recent government acknowledgement of the economic impact of doubling up on kitemarks is welcome, as is Sunak’s signing up for Horizon for fear of gifting Starmer an own goal in the general election campaign. Rees-Mogg’s failure to abolish 4000 EU regulations by Christmas is another move towards a less obdurate Brexit.

There is always the chance of an absolute disaster for the Tories, given the general disaffection or boredom with them, and given that a Tory MP may need a 15,000 majority to be absolutely safe. It is surprising that Ed Davey has not broken cover and tried to pick up some more actively pro-European voters, but he too was stung by the 2019 campaign. This all suggests that Starmer may form a minority government supported by the Lib Dems, or a Labour majority government. If that happens the Tories may be tempted to go even further down the right-wing route they are now travelling, although that may not bring voters back to the Tory fold later in the decade. Brexit gave the right its populist moment, but the electorate now do not like what they’re living through and do not want to reproduce that mistake. Starmer will need to govern well, deliver some growth and raise living standards.

Will Hutton’s new book outlines some measures he hopes Starmer will take to achieve

these economic and political goals. Some of these ideas were further outlined in the following discussion.

Q&A

Annette Dittert: I'm not so sure, if the Tory party goes fully towards the far right, that this won't be a danger to Starmer, especially as we have this right-wing media ecosystem that will support that, and even more so in case of a Trump victory in America. I'd rather hope the Tories come back to their senses somehow, although I don't see it at the moment. There are so many moving parts in Europe and the way the EU is at the moment. EU decision-making needs to be reformed and structures become more flexible, with hopefully a way for the UK to rejoin in some way at some point. But in the UK there was a serious misunderstanding about the German think-tank report on possible new approaches to enlargement, which was not about the UK but appeared coincidentally while Starmer was in Paris to see Macron. I happened to have seen the paper before it came to the table. It was accidental that Starmer was in Paris that day, it had nothing to do with the talks between Starmer and Macron. And it had also nothing to do with Britain. But it was interesting to see how it was immediately weaponised here.

The most important thing will be that Brussels will be able to trust Starmer, trust Britain and trust Starmer to be able to have a second term, Starmer really needs to convince them that he will be in there for the long term, otherwise, they will be extremely reluctant to do anything, I totally understand his strategy, I find it disappointing as well but I think it's the right way forward. There's no way of saying let's get back into the EU, in the current environment we are in Britain with this right-wing media environment. But he has to be careful with this cautious strategy as well; as I said, he can tumble into situations where he way also becomes disingenuous. The other day, he gave an interview on Radio 4, and was asked whether the British economy wouldn't be better off inside the single market. And he said no. I think that's crossing a line that I personally don't like because I think it's not only about rejoining Europe, but also about repairing this messy British political culture that has come with Brexit and come back to some decency, honesty, and out of this post-truth era. And he's sometimes in danger of crossing that line. So it's a tricky path.

Colin Gordon [Chair]: We have had a couple of chats with Peter Foster of the *Financial Times* who bought out a book on Brexit recently and made the same point about disingenuousness and not being totally honest about what it takes to remedy Brexit: the palliation package which Labour is talking about - Stella Creasy, or David Lammy, or Starmer himself - fixing various things like professional recognition and veterinary agreements etc., will not buy us more than marginal mitigation of the enormous damage of having started a trade war against ourselves.

Annette Dittert: I think if Starmer keeps raising hopes based on his red lines and his minor mitigations, he's in for huge disappointment because that won't change things, when it comes to the damage Britain has done to itself. I totally agree with Peter Foster. And he won't get very far with what he's saying at the moment. I guess it's a cautious step-by-step policy that he will focus on winning the election and then take it from there. I think it's the right tactics but it's a tricky path.

Colin Gordon: Which means he's got to leave room to adjust the narrative when he wins, rather than lock himself into something which is going to be inadequate. Would you agree with that, Will?

Will Hutton: A lot hangs on the election outcome. It could be that Suella Braverman and Jacob Rees Mogg lose their seats. The political landscape in Britain will be very different if 150 Tories get back, rather than 275. But then right now on twitter there's Priti Patel dancing with Nigel Farage. There are so many uncertainties and moving parts. I'm not sure that Trump's challenge in the States is going to be as successful as people fear.

There are two scenarios. One is that we live in very right-wing times; Kaczynski is going to win in Poland for a third term, according to some polls [he did not win – ed.]. It's not obvious that a centrist will win the presidential elections in France in 2027. In Germany the AfD are number two in the opinion polls, seeming bound to win control of one of the states in former East Germany: you can get very gloomy indeed about the march to the right. It may be true that only 3% of the world population is actually on the move across

borders. But the world population is eight, soon nine billion. 3% of 8 billion is 240 million. That's a lot of people moving across borders. They're going to carry on coming, and the states in which they're coming from are all rogue or broken. It's a huge challenge to the globe. How does one live a common life? How does one create a common life around enlightened social democratic principles where five or 10% of your population is being added to every year by people who have complementary or different or adjacent values to your own? That's the territory that Trump is playing into.

Scenario two is that the centre does hold. We manage to find some way of containing and managing the flow of refugees and immigrants, to manageable levels. And you reignite economic growth and social contracts in Europe. In my book, it's what I call a marriage of the we and the I, a marriage of ethical socialism and progressive liberalism, which are like a Venn diagram with huge overlap in their values, and progressives need to recognise that overlap. We haven't got the luxury of saying liberals and socialists must be enemies. They share the same values and they want the same kind of policies. It's not the time to luxuriate in difference, it's time to sink differences and come together with a public philosophy that gives you a platform to do the things that would make our great capitalist democracies function better. We managed to do that in Britain.

There's no point in criticising Starmer particularly or Ed Davey, they're the best we've got and in their own way they do they do represent progressive liberalism and the ethic of socialism. I think Labour will be quite sure-footed when it's in government, and I think we'll make progress. There are important constitutional reforms that are available to it, which I think may change the dynamic. So let's not get too down, maybe if we can get things right, in Britain, it will inspire people. Vox haven't got anywhere in Spain, a left government has held the line there with some good politics and some good arguments; it doesn't have to be the case that separatists and nationalists will make Spain great again, Italy great again, France great again, America great again, that they have to win everywhere. There are people who think like us in every country. And they may be beleaguered, but there's hope that we can make common cause.

Sue Wilson: I was curious to know what Will and Annette thought of all the posturing at the Tory conference, and how much of that was a direct bidding to be the next leader of the party?

Annette Dittert: It's definitely a posturing for the succession after the election and after Sunak. When I was there this weekend, nobody, not a single Tory I talked to out of camera range, thinks that they will win the next election. The mood is extremely downbeat. They won't say that in front of a camera, but when you talked to people at the fringe meetings there, the whole thing was was beauty contests, who's going to be next and who is where, and as I said, the one-nation Tories were very invisible. There were very few of them there. It's mostly about who will succeed Sunak, because everybody thinks once he's lost, he's out and he will go back to California. That was the current mood.

Will Hutton: I agree. I do not think Suella Braverman, even if she has the support of Liz Truss... the idea that she could be an appealing candidate that the country could get behind is extraordinary. I think the woman to watch is Kemi Badenoch.

Annette Dittert: Again, I agree.

Jo Pye: Coming up to the Labour Party conference, is there a prospect of any movement or hope, in terms of proportional representation being discussed in a positive way?

Will Hutton: Yes. last year, the unions joined the branch members and actually voted for proportional representation, and the British Social Attitudes survey had, for the first time ever, a majority in favour of PR of 52%. That's the first time in forty years. Scotland, Wales, and London are all governed by a quasi-PR system, and it works quite well. London's governed quite well, and so are Scotland and Wales, quite a lot of the country is governed at the second tier by PR. One of the points I'm making in my book is to agree very much with the Royal Commission set up in 1908. That was set up by Asquith to look at the voting system, and it recommended an STV PR system when it reported in 1910. It was a bit of a shame, because the report fell between the two elections in January and December of that year, and Asquith took it very seriously. And then, after the First World War, you had to give women the vote, and you had to give the soldiers the vote. It was just impossible not to, and you couldn't carry on with giving the universities two or three MPs as they had done to Oxford and Cambridge, you had to offer a reform and reform of

the voting system was on the table, as the Royal Commission had recommended STV. Again, interestingly, [the Liberal leader] Asquith was inclined to do it, but he was in opposition. Lloyd George who was the puppet head of a Tory-majority administration would have gone with AV. The Lords wanted to go with AV and the Tories in the House of Commons wanted to go with first past the post, and who killed PR? Ramsay MacDonald [Labour]. Ramsay MacDonald thought the electorate was going to be trebled, first past the post will really work for us, and so he then switched and wouldn't back PR. And so they said, Okay, we'll revisit it again in 1924 [laughter]. A hundred years on, we're still talking about it. I think this time round, the system will change. Probably, if Keir Starmer gets a second term they'll change the voting system.

Richard Wilson: Just returning to the Conservative Party. If they lose the election, do you see any prospect of them taking a lesson from the defeat and reappraising the direction they're going in? According to the latest YouGov poll, the number of young people planning to vote conservative is 1%. This seems to suggest that the conservatives have no interest in young people, the future voters: how long can they continue in that direction of not thinking about their future as a viable party? Do you see any point in the next five years or so where it dawns on them that the direction they're going, further into their base, further and further to the far right, is not going to be a successful direction for them? Or am I being too optimistic and basically is the whole world is going to the far right, and we're all doomed, really, if that happens?

Annette Dittert: I've joked on Twitter that if one party will bring Britain back into the EU, it probably will be the Tories, because if they are really turning the corner, then it will be much easier to do, it would also be much easier for the EU to accept Britain back when it doesn't fear these bonkers far-right Tories still lingering in the background. I think the Tories will very quickly understand that there's a road to nowhere, once they've lost the election, that's my feeling from having talked to a lot of people at Manchester and since then a little bit over the last days again, quite intensely. I think it is almost inevitable that at first they will go to the extreme in opposition if they lose the election, but this won't last very long. Because elections are won in the middle. As you said, at some point, their voters will have passed away and they will urgently need to reorient themselves. I think this is not forever. But I think for now, this is what I think is happening. If they lose the next

election, I think the far right may take over for now. But that's not a sustainable strategy. And the Tories more than any other party I know in Europe are about power, and once they detect that they have to find new voters, they will adjust. But that's very speculative, of course.

Will Hutton: I think the 1% figure is 18- to 24-year-olds, actually, not all young people. I think it gets up to three or 4% at 30. I could easily imagine the Tory party returning with less than 100 MPs in the next election. The disaffection is intense. I think the scale of tactical voting will take everyone by surprise. The economy will not look in good shape. Sunak is disliked a lot. He's a feeble campaigner and a very bad politician. If they lose that badly, I think it will force them to have a major reassessment of who they are. This 'new conservatism' and 'national conservatism', Danny Kruger, tax cuts, family and flag, women should back in the kitchen, ' Kinder, Küche, Kirche '... some of the people at that National Conservative conference that was held in the summer: the majority of the British are not going to vote for that. I think they'd be very suspicious if they were asked to vote for it. Brutally, I think you can get away with right-wing stuff, but there are limits for most people. When it's self-evident that you're not indigenous British in your values... depending on the scale of the defeat, that could be a major reassessment and a marginalisation of the right. What could happen to Lee Anderson is what's happened to Dan Wootton. I go to Premier League football grounds and what's striking is that the crowd don't like racism, the crowd embrace multiculturalism. And also, the woke and trans stuff, if your son or daughter wants to experiment with being with, or with being the other sex for a period, you know what, you get on with it fine. It's not a national political issue. I thought the banning of trans people from hospital wards which went on today. I'm not sure how much mileage there is in that? I'm not sure. I'm hopeful that actually, Britain could be on a bit of a progressive run. And that things that people like me and you Richard have argued for years, will actually be picked up and run with by our political class and what's better, that most of the stuff will work quite well. We could be in for a prolonged period of progressive government having majority support and the Torie once they witness that will come back to the centre where the votes are. We all know that everything I've said could be contradicted by a powerful right-wing press with lots of harping on immigration, small boats etc., but I've even noticed that actually, people are more tolerant about immigration, too. So, let's be optimistic!

Annette Dittert: I really enjoy Will being so optimistic today, I'm a bit less optimistic. But overall, I agree. I think the Tories will have to come back to the centre eventually. Because this is a path that leads to nowhere. I'm always really surprised, as a German who knows Europe a little bit. Britain is so much less racist than most countries in Europe. And this whole stoking up racism doesn't really sit well with British people when I talk to them, even I also in areas where you would expect that... of course, you have also racist corners, as in every society, but I always find this extraordinarily badly played by Sunak, and by Braverman. When we went to Portland the other day for a short documentary on this whole Bibi Stockholm circus, we didn't find anybody who didn't feel sorry for these guys on the boat.

Will Hutton: I have an Arsenal season ticket and when Bukayo Saka scores, the jubilation in the crowd is amazing. All around me, there's black and brown, we're all throwing our arms around each other and cheering and shouting, it's a phenomenon. There's not a trace of racism.

Annette Dittert: There is a bit of racism there but of all the European countries I know, Britain is the least racist and the one where multiculturalism has worked best. And that's why it's so surreal, that Sunak thinks being from Indian heritage himself, that this is a good strategy, something I find extraordinary.

Seema Syeda (AEIP): From a UK perspective, my personal experience as a woman with Bangladeshi heritage reflects the data in areas where there are already big migrant populations and urban settings are very multicultural, I rarely see or hear any racism. And when I compare this with my experience as someone who's travelled a lot around Europe, and even in big cities like Paris and elsewhere in France, people are much more openly or casually racist on the European continent, towards me, than I ever experienced in the UK. But when I go to the countryside in the UK, and other parts where there are barely any migrants, for instance, Norfolk, I experience visible hostility when people see me and my skin colour. And I think that there is racism in parts of the UK where there is not much exposure to already living in a multicultural community. And I think in those areas, people's opinions are very easily influenced by the media, because there's no countervailing

narrative, there's no real-life experience. And I think that is disproportionately reflected in the electoral results, because of first past the post, which gives disproportionate control over our system to those areas which have less migrants. So I think the good thing is we don't have an extremely racist society in the UK. But it is a divided society. And there really is racism there.

Annette Dittert: Indeed yes. I didn't want to say that there is no racism in Britain. But I think it's very good that you've made that a bit clearer. I think, because in general, you have much more exposure to that reality in cities, and in many smaller communities as well, rather than only in Paris or Berlin, and Berlin has changed a bit. But if you go to East Germany, it's really scary. Overall, British society is so diverse compared to European societies that I find it extremely weird, and I don't really think it will work, that Sunak is so much trying to push that button, and/or condoning some provocative comments by ministers, while disingenuously appearing to distance himself from others.

Chris Hammond: Germany's Saxony and Brandenburg are tightening up their border controls with Poland. The AFD is gaining in the eastern states in Germany, while in Britain we continually hear 'stop the boats'. Do we need immigration to supplement the diminishing working population in Europe generally? And could immigration create serious cracks in the unity of Europe?

Annette Dittert: Immigration at the moment is the most divisive topic within the EU and it's really dangerous what's happening there. In Britain, there is a real problem with irregular migration, as I prefer to call it. 40-50,000 people on boats is really not an issue and even if Braverman says there will be a hurricane in her speech today, this will not happen. I think Britain is actually in a unique position to handle that better. The problem in Europe is there's no joint EU policy on migration, and the result is a total mess. Like when you had the Lampedusa situation where suddenly, people came from Tunisia and all landed on this little island. It was presented by the media as a huge, massive crisis. Meloni made a huge story out of it, although the migrants are asylum seekers who land in Italy but then move north to other countries because the whole Dublin agreement doesn't work anymore. I wonder if any of us knows how that's supposed to work. Normally, migrants or asylum

seekers who arrive at the shores or borders of the EU, should be registered at their point of arrival. And then they would be spread out to different countries who have to take their fair share, under some joint burden-sharing that hasn't really worked. And Italy is sending them on without registering them. And because there are no borders, they all more or less end up in Germany, or France, which I think has serious potential, if the EU doesn't get a grip on this and really establish some fair burden-sharing, to undermine the EU as a political project, especially if we have more and more right-wing governments, and especially if Kaczynski wins in Poland in October. I think this is a very dangerous thing in Europe, if they don't get a common joint EU policy that is seen as fair by all the federal states in East Germany, who had to close the borders, because Poland was deliberately sending through thousands of people to exploit that in their campaign for the upcoming election in mid-October. This is a really dangerous thing politically for the unity of the EU and the existence of the EU as a political peace project. It's something that worries me far more than 50,000 people a year crossing the Channel here. Because it has the potential to corrode the EU as a political project.

Will Hutton: Well, I'm equally worried, actually. I was very struck by what Seema said, in London we live in a multicultural, multi-ethnic community which is great, but you're quite right, go to the smaller towns, go to Norfolk and it's a different story. I cycled down there last summer, and it was as you say. So, thank you for that corrective remark.

Do we need the people? The straight answer is, yes, we do need the people. The birth rate is below replacement rate and without ethnic minorities' higher birth rate we wouldn't be reproducing our population. And there's labour shortages all around the place, as everyone knows, even in an economy that is just doing barely better than stagnation as we are at the minute. If we ever grew, there would be trouble ahead. So, yes, we do need the people. We have to find some way of really welcoming, I don't know what the figures should be, we can debate what it should be 200,000, 300,000, 400,000 people a year, we can easily handle that and accept them. But there does come, I think, a threshold at which living a common life, and having infrastructure that doesn't creak at the seams, requires some limitation of the incoming numbers. And that probably must be done on a European basis. But given some of the right-wing politicians don't want anyone in, and instead are aiming at deporting people one way or another, the scope for mischief and malevolence is incredibly high. Equally I'm worried about climate change. And in Africa, what's happening

in the Sahel, all the instability: as a young man or young woman in those places, I would want to get out: what future is there in these places? And you can see the desperation to get to Europe. Europe or North America? I don't know. You can want to be optimistic because I don't like doing pessimism. And I'm disposed to be optimistic. There are always solutions to all issues. But you could imagine the world and Europe in particular flirting with some noxious ideologies before things get better.

Annette Dittert: I agree. We need people. Europe also needs people, it just has the potential to become a very divisive subject as long as within the EU, there is no sense that there's some fair burden sharing. As I said, the number of asylum applications currently being processed in Germany and France are 10 times higher than those in Italy. And that's why in Germany, the AfD is getting so strong, because they don't, they don't understand how this can happen. And that also creates an anti-EU feeling, because people feel not in control. It is seriously getting to a point... And yet it's totally doable, and these people are needed in Europe. But the way in which the EU cannot currently get to a joint policy on this because it's still nation-states haggling with each other, because we don't have an EU government, is a very dangerous moment, I think in the history of the EU. On a rational level, the people who are coming in at the moment are more than needed. Germany has a huge labour shortage, like Britain. I think the fear, and the reason why Braverman can stoke up these fears, is that everybody more or less knows, even those who deny it, that with the climate crisis, this gets worse. And of course, there will at some point have to be a way of helping these countries more so that people can stay there because at some point, it will be difficult. At the moment, that is something that is perfectly doable. And I would rather be optimistic in Europe, if the EU can get to what they're working on hard at the moment, a fairer joint migration policy, but in the long run, there need to be ways to help people in these areas. Because if it gets hotter and hotter, half of Africa will not be habitable anymore. What happens then? So, I like your optimism, Will, I don't totally share it. But I think, yes of course you can solve these things. And I also think these things come in waves; the right-wing populism we have at the moment will hopefully be overcome eventually, as well. But right now I'm rather seeing the dangers, I must admit.

Colin Gordon: We've had some sessions, quite rich sessions with colleagues working on issues of asylum, welcome and migration policies. And they've advised us that the way

forward has to be through European consensus, because the problem can't be solved any other way. And that one of the ways we need towards achieving shared understanding may be closer cooperation between civil society actors in the different European countries to push this in a constructive direction. And even from where we are outside of the EU at the moment, we pro-Europeans in the UK can ally ourselves with pro-democracy civil society actors in other member states, I'm thinking of Pulse for Europe in Germany, for example, as a good example of that kind of conversation, and groups in France, Italy, Spain, and the Eastern member states. And we know that Seema and her friends in Another Europe is Possible and European Alternatives are plugged into those kinds of conversations – as well as sharply questioning some of the solutions which the EU is now discussing.

Annette Dittert: I have to go now, I'm really sorry, because it's the day of German Unity, and I have to do a panel near the German Embassy! So thanks very much for having me. I'd love to stay longer next time.

Colin Gordon: Thank you, Annette! We would most certainly like to have you back soon! Will, before we close: people are giving a lot of advice to rejoiners at the moment, we see advice in the *Spectator*, we see advice in *The Daily Telegraph*, about do's and don'ts for rejoiners. Do you have any advice?

Will Hutton: Splendid, the *Spectator*, the *Telegraph* giving us advice! I think we stick to it. This is slightly fanciful, but it's not impossible: I think that with the caveats that Seema rightly mentions, Britain is a more successful, multiethnic, multiracial society than many other European countries. It also has a scope to be dynamic economically. It also has scope to refashion a flexible 21st-century social contract. And also, to do democracy better. We know what some of the things are that would do that. It's a hope that brick by brick, stone by stone, to cross the river, that Starmer leads a successful progressive government that gets elected a second time. And that starts a process of close affiliation to the EU, and actually, they start to look at us and think, we don't have to have Meloni. We don't have to have Swedish right, we don't have to have the AfD, we can reproduce what they're doing in Britain. And maybe we can become a force for good in Europe. So I want

that. I know I'm fanciful. But if you can't hope and believe in things, what's the point? And I think we have maybe touched bottom, and things could get better from here on out. And consequently, The kind of approach that needs taking is stop divergence, pick areas where we can get closer, eventually, have some joint European policy community with UK in the outer ring. recognise that engagement isn't good enough, that we want to be much more in the room than we are; external forces like Russia, actually force Europe to come together, notwithstanding immigration. And actually, we do rejoin the European Union. And I think it'll happen in the early 2030s. There you are [laughter]!

Participants

Chair

Colin Gordon

Speakers

Annette Dittert

Will Hutton

Richard Corbett

Mark English

John Gaskell (Chair, Grassroots for Europe)

Fiona Godfrey

Chris Hammond (East Kent EM)

Helen Johnston

Else Kvist (New Europeans UK)

Sharon Leclercq-Spooner

Richard Morris

Gareth Steel

Kezia Tobin

Seema Syeda (Another Europe is Possible)

R A Watt

Kate Willoughby

Sue Wilson - Bremain in Spain - Chair

Yorkshire for Europe Groups

Round Table Team

Colin Gordon

Helen Grogan

Jonathan Harris

Caroline Kuipers

Juliet Lodge

Lilian McCobb
Tony McCobb
Jo Pye
Magdalena Williams

Next Sessions

Tuesday November 7th, 5pm - 6:30pm – details shortly.

Tuesday December 5th, 5pm - 6:30pm – details shortly.