

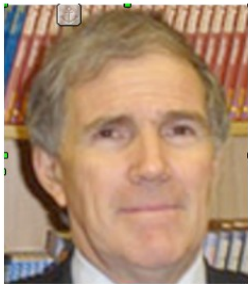


Grassroots for Europe Round Table #49

"Brexit in the Conference season - how was it for EU?"

Tuesday October 8th, 2024

Summary Report



Our aim in this session was to review the recent annual political party conferences to help get a current impression of the politics of Brexit and UK-EU relations, in terms of dynamics, leadership policy, strategy and opinion. Speakers from the parties reported what happened in terms of Brexit and UK-EU relations at the respective annual conferences - silences, murmurs, moments of candour and hints of progress. There is said to be a cross-party majority for Rejoin in the 2024 Parliament as well as in the country - could we see that majority begin to discover its political will? How can engaged citizens best work together in and across the parties towards this goal?

About the chair and panel.

Brendan Donnelly is a former MEP, Director of the Federal Trust and Leader of the Rejoin EU Party.

Caroline Voaden MP [Liberal Democrat, South Devon, 2024]. A former MEP, she was the last leader of the Liberal Democrat party in Europe. Caroline has been CEO of Devon Rape Crisis, a businesswoman and a Reuters journalist.

Prof. Catherine Rowett is a former Green Party MEP for the East of England and Professor of Philosophy at the University of East Anglia. Catherine is the Coordinator of the Green Party's Policy Working Group on Europe

Mark English is the [Strategic Advisor on Policy and Media](#) at EMUK, after working for 25 years at the European Commission, including on economic and single market policy, as a spokesperson in the Commission President's team and as Head of the Commission's press office in London. He also worked at the European Parliament on tackling disinformation.

Introducing the session, our chair **Brendan Donnelly** mentioned a recent comment from a well-known member of an industry that's been affected by Brexit that she didn't anticipate any great difficulty in our rejoining the European Union from the side of the European Union. He cited a comment from a senior official in the European Parliament, that the British would be welcomed back with open arms "if they changed their mind about

Europe". These words should be understood as calling for evidence of a deep and sustainable change in UK attitudes towards Europe – as well as an advance from the public state of widespread ignorance about the EU, and a will to full participation rather than, as before 2016, an apparent preference to be half in and half out. Brendan suggested that the 'step by step to rejoin' approach may not be the right way to build a convincing case for our intended goal.

Caroline Voaden MP. I'll talk about what we covered at the party conference and how we approached Brexit (or not) during the general election campaign, and what the party thinking is around that. I'll be happy to take questions on other matters. Europe did feature at conference, as it always does. We had one debate which was around restoring links for young people, which was a policy motion which was passed unanimously. Everybody was completely on the same page. That is something that we feel we can really push the Labor Government on, because it's not a contentious thing, it feels to most people like a positive, most people can see the benefit of it. It does get conflated with immigration issues, but if we can keep stressing that it's not about immigration, then that's an area of policy that I'm sure we'll pursue during this Parliament.

We also had four fringe events which were wholly or partly about EU matters. There was one about membership of the Single Market. There was one on resetting UK-EU relations. There was one called "towards a new chapter of market integration with the EU". I was on a panel looking at North Atlantic relations and how we're supporting Ukraine. I brought into that the relationship between the UK and the EU in the terms of working with America on global issues like Ukraine and the Middle East, and how our position in Europe worked as a bridge between the United States and the EU. As always, fringe events about anything on Europe were packed to the doors - they never get a big enough room. People in those fringe events are desperate to hear the party talk about our policy towards Europe, and hear news of progress being made, but the feeling was also really strong that we fought three general elections on Brexit, and did pretty badly; in 2019 particularly, the message that we wanted to go back into the EU just didn't work, and we were roundly beaten because of it.

Because of that, the party took a very definite strategic decision that in this general election, it was so important that we talk to voters about what matters to them. There was a huge amount of polling done across the country and the three issues that just kept coming up again and again were: various aspects of the NHS, (dentistry, hospital appointments, access to GPs), the cost of living, and sewage. In my South Devon seat alone, we were talking to 2000 households a month on the doorstep. We spoke to over a million people in the general election campaign itself, and that's not including the year before, when many of us were campaigning full time, so we had a huge sample of data. Those were the issues that people were most concerned about, and those were the issues we fought the election on, and those were the issues that gave us the biggest ever Liberal Democrat representation in Parliament. It's not true to say that people don't talk about the EU. It is mentioned sometimes on the doorstep. It was with me, mainly by people who are involved in business, people who are struggling with importing, exporting, red tape, finding staff. Generally, if people weren't involved with business, they didn't automatically bring it up, which might give a sense that people aren't bothered about it. I think it's a bit of a chicken and egg thing. I don't think that immigration was such a big conversation before the Reform party went really hard on talking about immigration all the time and forced the Conservatives to the right, and forced them to start all the scare stories about how immigration is destroying the country. There were a lot of conversations on the doors about immigration, way more than about the EU. It was mentioned a lot because they had formed that narrative in the media, and they had caused people to think it is a big problem, even in the area where I live, South Devon, where we really don't have an immigration

problem, people say, I can't get a doctor's appointment because of all these immigrants. You say, well, is that really the case here? It's really not. It's just a red herring. But the point is that that it became a conversation because it had been put there by the politicians. There is an argument to say, if we talk enough about the EU, then people will talk about it again. There has definitely been a fear of talking about it because of the divisiveness that it caused and because it became so toxic that it's easier not to talk about it. Certainly for this election, it felt that it was easier to not go down that road of the toxicity of the Brexit debate. Those three problems we have that people mention, cost of living, NHS, pollution, can all be linked to Brexit. There is an argument that part of what the Liberal Democrats should be doing is making more of the causation of some of these things. Brexit is behind part of the staffing crisis in the NHS, we know thousands of people left and went home. Our hospitality industry is on their knees because they can't get staff and in terms of economic growth, every time I did a hustings or a meeting with voters during the election, and they talked about economic growth, or improving the economy, I would always say, let's join the Single Market - to a huge round of applause, there is definitely an appetite to talk about that. The government keeps saying, we need to grow the economy, while there's this huge elephant in the room: we could make a massive difference if we said we were going to go back into the Single Market and started taking positive steps to do that. This message was always received really well in my constituency, when I talked about our roadmap, that we want to get us back in the Single Market, with an end result of eventually getting back into the EU.

In my constituency there's a town called Brixham, which has the biggest value in England of fishing catch sold through its harbour. It was heavily pro-Brexit in 2016 and Boris Johnson came down there and toured the harbor, they all voted for it, and they thought that the fishing industry was going to be liberated and rejuvenated by Brexit. They all feel really badly let down. For a Liberal Democratic politician, it was have been quite uncomfortable walking around Brixham in 2019, whereas now they just openly say to me, we were lied to, it was all lies, none of it was true, none of it happened as they promised. They either feel that they were made fools of or they feel angry. That says to me that there are a lot of communities in the UK that were very pro-Brexit back in 2016, where, if the conversation is framed correctly, they would maybe reluctantly, but probably admit that actually it hasn't worked, and it hasn't brought them the sunlit uplands that they were promised. Now it's incumbent on us as MPs, and it's incumbent on a lot of the Labour MPs, particularly in the north of England, to be brave enough to talk about the damage it's done, or the fact that it hasn't brought any of the benefits that were promised.

I always felt at the time of the referendum that those were politicians who should have been saying much more loudly to people in left-behind communities that Brexit wasn't the answer for them, but somehow it was seen as an easy solution to all the stuff that people saw that was going wrong. The farming community in South Devon will also say that they have been very badly let down by things like the trade deal that was done with New Zealand and Australia, which is going to undermine food standards. I say it quite reluctantly, but agricultural subsidies are possibly the one area where things could have improved post Brexit, when we came out of the Common Agricultural Policy, but it was handled appallingly. We're seven years on, and the farmers still don't know what subsidies they're entitled to, and the whole thing is an absolute mess. There is potential to do some good work with farmers outside of the Common Agricultural Policy, but even they feel that it's been handled badly and that what they were promised hasn't yet materialized.

I was really pleased to see Ed Davey talk about the Single Market, about how important it was for the Prime Minister to reconsider going back into the Single Market. He said it was a mistake to rule this out ahead of negotiations and in terms of getting more investment into our country. He talked about the Brexit red tape and he went perhaps a little bit further

than he has done in the past, but obviously, it's not front and centre, and it wasn't front and centre at conference.

I said that we polled people quite a lot to see what issues were most relevant to them and the things they cared about the most. Now, we all know that polling is a bit of a fickle thing, and a lot the answers you get from polling depends on the questions that you ask. If you frame the questions differently, you may get a different answer. If people were asked whether they thought Brexit had had any impact on any of the issues that they feel most strongly about, that you might get a sense that more people are being affected by it, or bothered by it, or aware of the negative impact it's had. If you don't ask the question, you don't get the answer. I couldn't comment on whether the Liberal Democrats included that question in their polling, I honestly don't know. But the polling we've seen told us that Brexit was perhaps issue number 10 on the list of things people cared about, and that the NHS was way higher than anything else. That has formed the main plank of our campaigning, because that's what people are most concerned about at the moment.

Now we've got a massive Labour majority for five years and the Liberal Democrats are not going to be able to win any votes at all; what we have to do here is to try and have cross-party conversations with people who care about this, to try and form that underground movement of MPs who are willing to use the B word and talk about it across both sides of the House and see whether we can make some inroads with Labour that way, because Liberal Democrats are united. There are 72 of us, and we definitely look like a stronger opposition voice than the Conservatives at the moment. We will be speaking with one voice, and Brexit will come up. It came up in lots of maiden speeches. There are lots of new MPs who are keen to get this back on the agenda, hopefully in a more constructive way than it has been in the past. We don't want to go back to divisiveness, but we do need to start talking constructively about the steps we can take.

As a party, we have a roadmap. Youth mobility is definitely one of the first steps. I'd like to see a deal done for musicians and creatives so that they can tour in Europe again, because so many of them have been hurt so badly; things like bringing school groups to the UK without having to have visas and passports, little things like that. If we can start taking little steps that actually have a positive result, that are not too contentious, then it opens the door to talking about bigger issues.

Chair : Would the EU welcome a UK request to join the Single Market only, rather than seek full EU membership?

Caroline Voaden MP: I don't know. There is an argument, isn't there, that we would first need to introduce PR, to ensure a stable long-term majority for EU membership. That would add considerably to the timescale, and there might also need to be an indication that at least part of the Conservative party was committed to Europe.

Sue Wilson – Thank you, Caroline, for sharing your views with us recently in [Bremainers Ask](#). Have you had any conversations yet with the Labour MPs who belong to the Labour Movement for Europe? There seems to be a definite shift now in Parliament in terms of the balance of MPs' attitudes to the EU.

Caroline Voaden MP There has not been much time for this as yet since the election, but it definitely needs to happen. Maybe we need some kind of underground cross-party network, a bit like in the days of People's Vote.

Sue Wilson In a [recent webinar](#) with Stella Creasy MP, we raised the question of Labour's continuing resistance to the EU proposal for a Youth Mobility scheme, and she mentioned

an objection that this would be a scheme for only one country. Do you understand this objection and if so how should it be addressed?

Caroline Voaden MP My understanding was that this was a scheme intended to operate between the UK and all 27 EU member states. I will look into this, it sounds a bit odd.

Chair: The EU put forward this proposal precisely in order to have a common approach, rather than separate bilateral agreements between the UK and various member states. The smaller countries with limited negotiating capacity would be likely to prefer this.

Juliet Lodge. Could MPs be persuaded to support aligning with new EU developments, such as the new commissioner dedicated to inter-generational fairness, and the agenda of embedding a democratic consciousness and awareness among the electorate with participation in policy deliberation across the board? How would this sit with Starmer's apparent preference for agreements on security with the EU, while ignoring the cultural and educational value of contacts with Europe vis Erasmus+? Could MPs be more involved in raising public awareness of these issues, and also of the shared Russian threat to democracy in both UK and the EU?

Caroline Voaden MP. The media is the key obstacle to MPs bringing the issues to the public. Maybe we need media reform, even before voting reform. At the moment it is hard to interest MPs in our parties in learning from EU policy-making. Maybe when people have been allocated briefs and select committee roles in specific niche areas, they can start to look at related policy in the EU.

I agree with you that Russian interference in our democracy is a really dangerous thing. I don't see any sign that the government's going to be particularly strong on it. I don't think the media is going to call it out. There is a bit of a wall of silence around it. How can you influence MPs to talk about this more? Well, I don't know.

Part of the approach that the Liberal Democrats have taken in trying to get stories in the media is through the use of data. Things like marches and protests are losing their power a little bit because there have been so many of them. It's good for people's morale to do it, but I don't think it is influencing the political debate. One of the things our press team have been good at is using targeted freedom of information requests and then turning them into news stories which often make the front page. Topics like recruitment or retention in the NHS, the number of kids who haven't seen a dentist, or the level of bonuses that water companies are paying. And maybe there needs to be a more strategic approach around how to influence what the media is covering.

Jonathan Harris. In a recent podcast by Rory Stewart and Alastair Campbell, they interviewed the new Labour minister Douglas Alexander who said Labour were upset by the timing of the EU's youth mobility proposal but indicated that it might be something they would be prepared to negotiate over later on.

John Stevens. MPs have the power to force an inquiry into an issue. On this key issue of Russia, they could combine cross-party to force publication of the Russia report, which could be a very powerful tool in undermining the legitimacy of Brexit.

Prof. Catherine Rowett. I'll say some things about the Green Party conference, which now seems a little while ago, but I've been running the Europe Policy Working Group for the Green Party, and we've been at work on the Green Party's policy about Europe, for a long time, ever since Brexit, to be honest, and it's been a massive task because the policy was out of date in a number of ways. We wanted to have a complete suite of policies on things to do with Europe, especially with EU membership, but also to get some key things in place before that. Our big achievement this year was getting the complete policy to the

party conference. We had thought that the party conference would happen before the general election, and wanted to have the new Europe policy in place in time for the manifesto. But unfortunately, events overtook us, so we missed getting it into the manifesto, but there was sufficient work already done to support a proper manifesto commitment to rejoining the EU as our declared ambition, and one or two interim policy items. The big highlight, Europe-wise, in our conference was the passing of the policy document, which is 10 pages of detailed work on exactly where we stand on all the different EU institutions, what parts we would like to join while we're outside, how we would go about getting ready to rejoin, how we would build the consensus to do that, and the various procedures to be gone through, while also covering the Council of Europe, the ECHR and other institutions. That policy was put to the plenary session of the conference, where there were over thousand people, and nobody spoke against it; there was no dissent either in the room or in the online voting.

So that that's a great asset we now have in the party which clearly positions us on all the questions that might arise about what we would do and why. One of the interesting features of our policy is that we don't advocate Single Market membership without full membership. There are a number of reasons for that, but the main one is about the democratic deficit that comes from being outside the decision-making body while accepting the rules it makes. We don't think that it's right for the UK to lose its sovereignty in that way, but what we do think is that we will gain sovereignty, and gain an enormous amount of power from being in the European Union. One of the things about the Green Party's policy is that it's positive about what we can do for others. One of the things that we've been talking about already in this session is about this terrible attitude that the UK has had towards Europe, and it's still there to some extent, the thought that we need to get back in because we're in difficulties. We can't get the staff, or we can't get the economic growth or whatever. What could the EU do for us? Whereas our preferred attitude is, what can we do for the rest of the world by being part of this decision-making body that affects 27 countries directly and the whole of the rest of the world indirectly. That is an immense power that we have to bring about a better world, to bring about peace, to bring about better rights for workers and animals, for tackling climate change, and so on, that it would give us the opportunity actually to make a difference, instead of being in our little insular place. We've been taught by the media to think that somehow, everything that the EU does is damaging us instead of helping us, so there's a whole Green Party attitude that's built into this, this idea that actually to be part of something big is to be more powerful, not less powerful.

In addition, at the conference, there was a session run by the European Movement on youth mobility. Why on earth are Labour being difficult about that? One of the things that perhaps Labour have inherited from the previous government is this nonsensical idea that you only do proper negotiations with individual countries, and you don't treat the EU as being a country that you want to have dealings with, and so you attempt always to make bilateral agreements with the governments of particular countries. It's part of that whole attitude of thinking, we are the sovereign people. Parliament has sovereignty, all the decisions have to be made there, you can't have them taken away and put at the European level, that would be removing the right of the individual country to make its decisions about who comes and goes. We are little insular people who say, oh no, we don't want the EU negotiating on our behalf, and we assume that they also don't want the EU negotiating on their behalf, they only want to do business as a single country, we attributing the same attitude on their side. I think this is part of the difficulty that we have with both this current government and the and the previous one, that they seem committed to this slightly more isolationist and self-interested, 'keep it all for us' kind of agenda. The session at the Green Party Conference was also about Erasmus+ and what our schools have lost.

The other thing that happened at the conference in terms of Europe was that we had the AGM of the Europe Policy Working Group, and we invited Ellie Chowns, who is one of the four new Green MPs, to come talk about what's possible within the current setup in Parliament and what our new MPs can achieve. That was well attended and we had several new people volunteering to help with Europe policy.

Brendan Donnelly [Chair], introducing Mark English's contribution, commented on the idea that the Labour Party is offended the commission doesn't understand how important it is to look after the electoral interests of the Labour Party: that one of the penalties of being outside the European Union is that the Commission doesn't tailor its proposals to help governments or oppositions in countries that are outside, and/or have left the European Union.

Mark English First I should say that I am not a Labour MP, neither am I a Labour party insider. I was at the Party conference. In response your comment, Brendan, I really don't think that is the Labour Party's attitude. I think, and I'll explore this when I talk about the conference, that there has been, certainly in tone, a genuine reset. And I think a lot of the stories in the press about the European Commission being offended because Keir Starmer first went to Berlin and Paris are absolute nonsense, to be honest. At the time, when he went to Berlin and Paris, the Commission was not ready to receive him. You have to have a certain presence in Brussels to receive foreign leaders, and the people necessary weren't all there. I would give Nick Thomas-Symonds in the Cabinet Office enough credit as a savvy diplomat to expect that he would first have spoken to people in the European institutions before those visits to Berlin and Paris went ahead. I have absolutely no evidence that there was any kind of misstep in that respect. That doesn't mean there haven't been missteps in others.

Before I move on to the conference, I'd like to say something wearing my European Movement UK, and then after that, I'll be speaking personally. I'd like to emphasize that EM-UK are, constitutionally, a cross-party movement with a cross-party membership, and we never ever attack any mainstream political party as such, or take one party's side in elections or in debates. We welcomed it when Sunak made progress, notably on Northern Ireland. And one important strand of our current work, which I, despite being a Labour Party member, deeply welcome for some of the reasons that have been discussed, is to deepen relations with pro-European conservatives, and I think I can report that we're making good progress on that. Similarly, we have also supported what the current Labour government has done so far to improve relations with the European Union, but we have done so conditionally, in a qualified way, and while calling for more. For example, you can find [our CEO Nick Harvey's statement after the Prime Minister's visit the other day](#) on our website, explaining that we don't think there is contradiction between calling for rejoin and calling at the same time for smaller steps to take place first. I think our philosophy has been that, for many of the reasons that you mentioned, the UK won't be welcomed back without confidence building and without first showing that it is prepared to honor smaller agreements, and that's why we have our step by step strategy, which was endorsed by our elected executive and our National Council. But we always also call loudly and proudly for the end point to be the UK back in the EU, and we certainly won't stop doing that, and we combine that with calling for other steps in the short term. On some things that were said earlier about the Single Market: I think, if you do rejoin the Single Market, whether you do that as part of joining the European Union as a whole, or as a step towards it, it is almost going to be impossible to avoid a situation at some point where you are subject to rules without being a member and without having a vote, because the accession process, by definition, involves that happening, and that's what's happening at the moment with Ukraine and with other countries which gradually adopt the *acquis* [the collection of

common rights and obligations that constitute the body of EU law], which thus gradually adopt the body of EU rules before the starting gun is fired on their actual membership. So I think there's not really a big tension between those two issues, and we're quite neutral on that, but we do obviously think that the UK in the Single Market is better than the UK not in the Single Market. So if that's all that can be achieved in the shorter term, then we would be all for that.

I'll move on now, speaking just as myself, not for the European Movement, to the Labour conference. And I'll start with youth mobility, which featured very heavily. The EU's Delegation in London and several EU Member States were very active on the conference fringe and diplomatically yet forcefully raised the matter of youth mobility. And Stella Creasy, who, as you know, is the chair of Labour Movement for Europe, repeatedly backed a youth mobility scheme, and it was clear to me that (for good strategic reasons, I think) she had picked this theme as the one on which she and her movement would directly oppose the government line. From her point of view, the LME, in general, welcome the government's approach, but on that specific issue, they clearly distinguish themselves from the government line. Although ministers stuck to the Prime Minister's line that there were 'no plans' for a youth mobility agreement, there was a wide consensus among stakeholders at the conference that an agreement seems likely eventually. And my guess, and it is only a guess, is that the way forward is maybe for the UK first to return to Erasmus+. We're campaigning for that. Doing that will be less sensitive in terms of immigration, and it could be a first step in a gateway to a wider youth mobility scheme. And youth mobility got a lot of the press coverage, but a really wide range of EU-related issues came up everywhere at the Labour conference except in the main hall. But most people who go to party conferences never enter the main hall anyway, except for the Leader's speech, and few of the record 19,500 people at the Labour conference will have escaped a Europe-related discussion, and as Caroline said about the Liberal Democrat conference, everything on Europe was overflowing, most of all the Labour Movement for Europe's rally. The subjects of other fringe meetings that we hurried to under the Liverpool downpours included trade, climate change, defence, industrial strategy, health and the cultural sector, and the curse of Brexit was a theme running through all of them, it's left few areas of our national life undamaged, and that was clear from the conference. The EU ambassador to the UK, Pedro Serrano, struck a very positive tone at the reception he hosted. He was flanked by Nick Thomas-Symonds and the Europe minister Stephen Doughty and both of whom had warm words of their own, and nobody, I think, at that event, could be left in any doubt that trust is beginning to be reestablished and the tone is improving. And Europe was also present outside the conference bubble. You'll be glad to hear that the EM-UK Chair, Mike Galsworthy, made a day trip for various meetings and to address an enthusiastic and thoughtful audience of pro-EU activists and locals at the magnificent Ship and Mitre pub.

My main takeaways in each policy area are derived from these fringes and from the discussions that I had with everyone from ministers and MPs to constituency delegates. First, two somewhat contradictory things. While politicians and stakeholders at conference all seemed to appreciate that the UK's most crucial trading relationship is with the EU, there seemed in some cases to be limited understanding of how the EU works, and of why Britain cannot maximise its potential for economic growth outside the Single Market and the Customs Union. Various ministers expressed, as had their Tory predecessors, what I would call misplaced confidence in the UK's ability to develop a niche industrial strategy, which would allow it to compete with the low costs that China can offer, the vast subsidies that the US is currently offering, and with the EU's border free Single Market, and in brackets, in my view trade and defence policy towards China is certain to be a big issue in this Parliament, and there is considerable scope in that area both for cooperation and for tension between the UK and the EU and indeed the United States. That brings me on to defence and security. My main conclusion from the fringe meetings and discussions on defence and security was

that ministers, MPs and those from the EU side were on a similar page, evoking global threats and instability as urgent reasons for closer EU-UK cooperation. All sides also saw defence and security through a wide lens, encompassing issues like migration, energy security and tackling disinformation. The specific issue there that we can expect to become a bone of contention is whether UK defence suppliers will have access in future to EU defence procurement. President Macron, I think, wants the UK to be excluded. Some of the member states want the UK included, and there's an issue there also for Norway as an EEA member. Moving on to energy and climate change, improving cooperation in these areas was discussed at several meetings, and it was clear that several ministers and many backbench MPs have a background in energy and climate policy and want to put this to good use. And the fact that this is an area where the EU needs the UK, as well as vice versa, was also evoked. There are some very good thinktank papers on this theme, including a recent one from the UK in a Changing Europe. And the most urgent issue here, of far reaching importance for the UK's economic growth prospects and for its net zero policy, is how far the UK Government will align with the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanism, which is due to be implemented soon.

The plight of the creative industries and cultural touring was another key topic, with cultural stakeholders quick to point out the enormous damage done by Brexit. I promoted at the conference the European Movement UK's ongoing [Face the Music](#) campaign to ease Brexit red tape for touring performers – action on that is government policy and it may be possible to make progress as part of wider negotiations with the EU. Promisingly, there was also plenty of enthusiasm, though no commitment from ministers, for the UK to associate with the [Creative Europe](#) funding programme.

Finally, the most interesting and frankly alarming fringe meeting that I went to was not about Europe, but it was the Ipsos 'Beyond the Bubble' polling event, and it showed some striking and alarming things. The government's honeymoon is well and truly over. Only 33% now say that Labour are a competent government, and this was last week, so it might be lower now; though the Tories ratings when they were in government were much worse, never above 20% and are still much worse now they are the opposition. Pessimism amongst the UK electorate is off the scale. 18% said that they thought that the UK's economic situation would improve over the next year, and a similar figure said that they thought their own economic situation would improve over the next year. 60% thought both would get worse.

From our point of view as Pro-Europeans, I personally think the key to progress is threefold, and this relates to Brendan's initial question quoting Antonio Tajani. I'm speaking for myself here; some of these have been mentioned already. There are three things that we need to do as Pro-Europeans. First, link the areas that government is prioritizing, notably defence, to the bread and butter of trade and the economy, which is at the core of the EU itself and its relationships with non-members, and it's, in the end, what voters most care about. [As Nick Harvey said](#) after the Starmer visit to Brussels, "The closer the relationship between the EU and the UK is, the more economically self reliant and able to stand up to authoritarian states we will both be and if we want our shared values to flourish and to underpin ever closer cooperation, it's crucial that we repair the cultural exchanges and links that have been damaged by Brexit". The second thing I think we need to do, as has already been mentioned by Caroline and others is that we need to demonstrate that closer relations and ultimately, membership of the European Union can help solve the problems people most want to solve: healthcare, the cost of living, perhaps even migration issues, because that link between the EU and what matters most to them is clearly not there in voters minds at the moment. Labour MPs were unanimous that Brexit in the EU had barely been a theme on the doorstep during the campaign. Even Stella Creasy recognized this. And third, and this also relates to the question that Brendan asked, is to

back early steps forward, smaller steps, including those that government is already committed to and the EU is already open to, such as those on food safety agreement, a veterinary agreement, a defence pact, cultural touring, recognition of professional qualifications, etc, and also on youth mobility, because if we first make steps forward in those issues, that will build trust with the EU, and it will show UK voters that closer cooperation with the EU actually works, and that would help sustain and increase the electoral pressure for more progress.

To sum up these thoughts following the Labour conference and the Starmer visit to Brussels, three three-word messages: Europe is everywhere, reset is real, long haul ahead.

Chair: Can you imagine that the European Union would be prepared to allow the United Kingdom to be a member of the Single Market without being a member of the European Union? May it not risk being a time-consuming diversion?

Mark English: As I said, I think the accession process kind of implies that you become a member of the Single Market on the way, at least largely and gradually, before you join. But I do think that the EU is not yet ready. The EU wants, for the moment, to put Brexit behind us. A member of the German Bundestag called Jens Zimmerman spoke at a fringe debate, and he was asked how he thought Ursula von der Leyen would have reacted if Keir Starmer had said to her the other day, well, we'd like to rejoin, we'd like to launch the accession process now, whether to the Single Market or to the European Union, and Jens Zimmerman's response was, she would have been absolutely horrified and not known how to respond. But then he also said that he didn't think that that would be the case on the Commission side in a few years time. And I think the same would be true of the Single Market. The other issue that people may sometimes underestimate with regard to joining the Single Market, thought it may not be insuperable, is that it could be difficult to get Norway to agree to it, because it would have the effect of reducing Norway's influence, which is non-negligible.

John Stevens: Obviously, it's a bit early to judge this, but among the new intake of Conservative MPs, do we see any evidence at all that they might be biddable on the Brexit issue?

Mark English The history of the Conservative Party shows a tremendous ability to adapt to circumstances and to survive. So those that write it off might be a bit premature, but I don't think that we're in a position yet where we can build links with Conservative MPs as such. There is an organization called the Conservative European Forum, which had fallen into a kind of inactivity, and in the European Movement we're in contact with people attempting to revive it. We also have already, of course, Dominic Grieve as a vice-president. These are conservatives, people who were expelled from the Conservative Party, but who remain conservatives, who are very prominent in our communication effort, and who I am absolutely confident continue to appeal to a very wide body of potential conservative voters.

Chair: The Conservative Party has lost that ability, which is still lazily attributed to it, in my view, of infinite capacity for self-regeneration. Brexit is different. Anti-Europeanism is now something in the DNA of the Conservative Party. The idea that it can now emancipate itself from that is, I think, futile.

Peter Burke. What I find disappointing is the approach that Starmer is taking. It may be

that he's trying to divide and rule the European leaders. But this all just seems to be such a consequentialist approach. It's all about negotiating. It's all about what's good for us, rather than any part of a vision, any kind of attempt to do a proper reset in relations. And that's far too similar to what Conservatives have been doing. And as you said throughout this meeting, the fruits of this kind of approach are very paltry indeed. So does he not recognize that? And is it not time that he perhaps woke up and smelled the coffee?

Catherine Rowett: I agree that this is extremely depressing. Val Chaplin cites in the chat Peter Foster saying that Starmer isn't interested in Erasmus as it cost the UK £600 million with many EU students coming to the UK, but hardly any UK going to the EU. That's not strictly true, there were many UK students going to the EU, but that whole idea that you count up the cost of these EU citizens coming to study here and think that's a cost, when actually this was hugely beneficial. The benefits are massive, culturally and intellectually and academically, but also economically, of having people come to us and this idea that the only point of an exchange scheme is to send our students for free to get something for nothing is all part of the same worrying attitude of not entering into the spirit of something that could be much better than just penny counting.

Peter Burke. This transactional approach is based on a zero-sum game-philosophy where what's good for us is bad for the Europeans, and what's good for them is bad for us. And that's simply a fallacy. And seeing the common purpose here is the whole point, and that's what's missing

Catherine Rowett Absolutely. If only we could start to get that across in the media, because that's the attitude that people have adopted, partly because they've been fed the idea that our problems here are nothing to do with having left the EU and partly because they've adopted this 'what's in it for us', approach to questions about what we should belong to and what we should take part in.

Mark English. On Erasmus, I agree more than 100% with Catherine, and you might be interested to hear that European Movement UK will be further ramping up our Embrace Erasmus Plus campaign, and we will be making much more of the fact that it is not just something for privileged university students, that it covers a whole wide range of activities. And we'll be making also the points that Catherine just made about the benefits of having EU students in the UK. I'm going to be bit cheeky and a bit controversial about the transactional approach Starmer takes. As somebody who worked for the European Commission for 25 years, one thing that I can absolutely assure everybody on this call on is that relations between EU member states are very largely transactional and often based on quite narrow perceptions of their own self-interest. So I'm not entirely surprised that the UK Government would take that view, sad as this is in some way.

However I think the success of Starmer's visit to Brussels the other day has been massively underestimated. The fact that we now have summits that will take place, properly organized, properly prepared, on a multilateral basis with the EU is a huge step forward. The EU didn't want to do that with Johnson, and this degree of regained trust is a huge step forward. It's all that was possible to agree last week, because von der Leyen has no mandate from the member states to negotiate, even on youth mobility, the member states have not concluded the mandate, for the new Commission, even on that and on wider things, and the current Commission is moribund. The new Commission will take over in December or January, and only at that point could you start to have substantive negotiations. So everything that could have come out of it, came out of it. Yes, it was very limited, but that was always going to be the concern.

Ginny Smith. I wondered whether, if on November 5th or after Trump is elected as President of the United States, that is likely to accelerate a feeling across the political

parties in the UK that we need to get closer to the EU?

Mark English This was mentioned a lot at the Labour conference. The outcome of Trump coming back is unwelcome to most people, even if for diplomatic reasons, they can't say it. I would go further, and say that whether we get Trump or not, given the general policy direction of the US, and in particular, the heavy subsidies that it is giving to its own industry, the protectionism under the Inflation Reduction Act, even without Trump and even with Harris, the EU and the UK have every interest in coming together, especially the UK, but also the EU, to react to that in a way that is sensible and united.

Catherine Rowett. I think we think we've already got problems of clinging too closely to America, and people are rather divided, I think, over this. And unfortunately, Trump seems to be a particularly divisive figure, a bit like the Brexit thing. Brexit happened partly because of that sort of political message. Trump's message is very much the same as the Reform Party messages that we get here, and both are constantly being amplified by the media, inflaming problematic attitudes of protectionism, hating collaboration and hating the Europeans, which is not likely to give us a better, more positive feel among the people of Britain of being ready to embrace closer relationships with Europe, I think it's likely to lead to more division, And I think that we've got problems at the moment with divisions over foreign policy, over Gaza and Israel, and that's very much affected all the time by the voice of America on the world stage. Some of that, whether it's Biden, whether it's Harris or Trump, will continue to be a problem.

Cecilia Eve: I wanted to respond to Tamsin's question on how we galvanize and motivate young people to get involved. We have been running a very successful Embrace Erasmus campaign which got 50,000 signatures and which I spoke about at the Rejoin march. I want to comment from a young person's perspective. Our organization, YEM-UK, went to the European Parliament earlier this year. Two organizations, one called the [Intercultural Dialogue Platform](#), and the other called [Citizen Z](#), polled young people across the whole of the European Union, and asked them, what are the top three issues that matter to you? The first answer was climate change, the second was gender-based violence, and the third was affordability - housing crisis, cost of energy crisis, cost of living crisis: the polycrisis. How can we address these needs by improving representation, both for young people and for women? Earlier this week, I was at a Europe House event, to recognise the mobilization of the youth vote in the European elections, and two speakers there said that in the results of these elections, diversity actually regressed, and we are seeing a real reduction in equality, in social equality, social mobility, and of course, in the UK things like the loss of Erasmus, which disproportionately hits socio-economically disadvantaged people and young women hardest. So my question to all panellists is, how do you think we can go further in actually representing the views the needs of young people and keeping representation as diverse as possible?

Mark English I don't really have an answer to that. Clearly, it's something none of us have been good at. Political parties have not recently been very good at it, with the possible exception, although not necessarily with the most welcome results, of the Momentum period under the Corbyn Labour leadership. You know, getting young people motivated is really difficult, and I think the best thing that we can do is actually to be a bit more in listening mode and try to ask young people and young people's organizations what it is that would get them more interested. We have a lot to learn on this, and it's something all of us need to prioritise and get out there and ask the young people themselves to help us.

Catherine Rowett Well, the Green Party does tend to appeal quite a lot to young people, and so although roles like mine, for example, tend to fall to the retired, there's a large groundswell of younger people who when they do discover that politics might be what

would solve the problems that they're facing, find the Green Party's policies very much to their liking. And I've been very much encouraged that the conference was full of young people. There's a new Young Greens organization starting up in the Eastern region that we have just been recruiting. I went to talk in some schools during the election campaign, including at hustings events, and I had huge responses from people saying, how can I get involved, I want to do this stuff. So the Young Greens movement is starting up and working with school students and under eighteens. I'm finding that responsiveness, and the climate change issue being the number one priority for at least a section of the young people, is very encouraging. What's less encouraging is the effect that toxic masculinity and the Tommy Robinson stuff is having on another set of young people, and I think that we need to be very careful about what's happening with young men who are being recruited for a much more problematic way of putting the world to rights. That brings us back to the media and social media, the problem of what young people are consuming via the various bits of information that they're getting that is not the traditional newspapers, is not television, is not the radio. It's none of the things that we're seeing and that's a serious problem in a section of society.

Chair. One thing that Mark said fascinated me. He talked about transactionalism in the European Union. Of course, there's a vast amount of transactionalism in the European Union, but for most countries, or for almost all member states, even the more Eurosceptic members, this is understood as being in the context of the European Union. It's not something that, as it were, constitutes the whole rationale of being in the European Union. And I think that is a difference between much of the British approach to the European Union and that of other countries. I wouldn't deny at all the transactionalist elements in the EU, but I think that there is something unusual about the British in the sense that they don't see the institutions of the European Union as being a legitimate forum in which transactionalism is mediated and managed. Perhaps that's too broad a question for you to respond to, but I was fascinated by what you said, and one of the reasons why I'm not that keen on the idea that we should just rejoin the Single Market instead of rejoining the European Union, is that I think there's a transactional element to this reasoning: it's easier to demonstrate that we will benefit in trade terms from being in the Single Market, but I don't think that simply benefiting in trade terms is what the European Union is all about, or should be about, and the difficulty that successive British governments have had in understanding that has been a barrier to the British feeling at home in the European Union.

Mark English It's definitely right that there are differing proportions of transactionalism and idealism across different Member States. I think with all of them, as well as those who are now seeking to join, probably the higher percentage is transactionalism, but there is also a core of idealism there. Otherwise the EU it would never have happened in the first place in the aftermath of World War 2. But I think we'll see that some member states are much more susceptible to seeing the EU in a kind of pseudo-British way than others. You're seeing a lot of that in the Netherlands now, for example, that just wants to opt out of loads of stuff. You've seen it from some of the Nordic countries. There are differing attitudes across the European Union. But yes, it's clearly the UK is the one that left, and the UK was the one where politicians allowed a kind of negative and false impression of the European Union to win through in a way that hasn't happened elsewhere.

Round Table information: Campaign Asks

Round Table stakeholders will want to be aware of a campaign launched by our colleagues at **Liberty** to seek the urgent repeal of pieces of legislation by the last government which restricted and endanger the right to protest. The campaign is called **#WeProtest** - details and a crowdfund are here: <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/we-protest>. Please share this and support them if you can.

Tom Brake, Director of our partner organization **Unlock Democracy**, is currently seeking donations for their campaign **One Year to Fix Our Politics**. They write “The government has promised to fix our politics. Will you help us hold them to it?” More info here: <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/one-year-to-fix-our-politics>

For your diary: our next Round Table sessions

Tuesday, November 5th 2024. RT#50 - **A closer look at EU-UK relations and the road to rejoin**, with **Richard Corbett**.

Tuesday, December 3rd 2024. RT #51 **Dirty money, disinfo and Russia's war on European democracy** with **Peter Geoghegan** of **Democracy for Sale** and **Wojciech Przybylski**, of **Visegrad Insight**.

Tuesday, January 7th 2025. In conjunction with **YEM-UK: Making Europe a Safe Place for Women and Girls**. [Further info shortly].