

Grassroots for Europe Round Table #RT50

Reset, and then what?

Richard Corbett [European Parliament]

Typhaine Morillon [European Parliament Liaison Office, London]

SUMMARY REPORT



Richard Corbett: What is the Reset?

Although on the side of the UK government there has been a change of tone and a willingness to talk with individual European countries - if not the EU itself - there is still a question as to what “reset” means. This is partly because the EU is in transition. The new Commission has not yet taken office, with confirmation hearings for candidate Commissioners taking place before the European Parliament at the moment. These hearings are a prerequisite to the EU Parliament giving its vote of confidence. To digress: it would be interesting if the House of Commons gave its approval of a British government, if it asked each prospective minister to appear at a public hearing in front of the relevant parliamentary committee. When the new Commission has taken office, it has to get a mandate from the Council of Ministers of each member state as to what can be negotiated with Britain. There is also considerable ambiguity as to the translation of “reset” into other European languages.

The Labour government has made it clear that it wants a new security agreement. A security agreement was included in the Political Declaration between the UK and the EU which was attached to the Withdrawal Agreement. This Political Declaration set out the future relationship and made explicit provision for a far-reaching security agreement, including cooperation on sanctions and the attendance of UK ministers at relevant Council meetings. However, after Brexit was secured, Johnson refused to negotiate the security agreement even though it has been approved by both parliaments. So we have a trade and cooperation agreement with no security

dimension. Both the UK and the EU would welcome a security agreement.

Additionally, a phytosanitary agreement, aligning the UK with EU health and safety sanitary rules for agriculture would facilitate trade by reducing border checks. If this were to be extended to the chemical sector, maybe by rejoining Reach, this would be a further positive step. The UK has already rejoined the Horizon research programme, albeit with progress still needed.

However, there remains considerable uncertainty about the extent of any reset as a result of the three massive red lines as to what it would not entail – no rejoining the Single Market, no rejoining the Customs Union and no Freedom of movement. This means that however ambitious the reset is, it will not change the economic dial. As long as the UK remains outside the Customs Union there will be checks, form filling and potential delays at the border. Divergence from the Single Market implies regulatory checks of British products at the border or beyond since these products will not necessarily have been made to the same standards and under the same procedures. Where there is divergence, products may be banned or subject to different conditions. Non-alignment with Single Market rules necessarily implies regulatory red tape.

Stating that the UK will not rejoin the Single Market is disingenuous, as the Single Market is not a membership organisation but a set of EU rules and policies with which countries can align. For example, Norway aligns with all Single Market rules other than fisheries and agriculture. The same applies to Switzerland with a few additional exceptions and even Turkey and the Western Balkan countries have some measure of alignment. The more closely aligned a country is, the fewer regulatory barriers exist. By ruling out alignment with Single Market rules the UK imposes extra inconvenience, costs and delays on itself.

Ruling out Freedom of Movement is part and parcel of Britain's wider debate and apparent paranoia about migration and immigration. But, EU Freedom of Movement is not the problem. Most migration to Britain is, and always was, from outside the EU. Individual EU member states have always been free to be as open or as restrictive as they wish and this is not controlled by EU rules. EU Freedom of Movement – always a minority of those coming to the UK – was a reciprocal but not an unconditional right. It depends on the beneficiary either finding work – normally within three months – or proving that they are self-sufficient and do not represent a burden on the host state. Unlike other EU countries, the UK, even under Theresa May, never enforced these conditions. So, we could apply these rules and have conditional free movement within the EU.

The Labour government's understandable extreme caution, not just in relations to the EU, stems from its desire to win the general election from the starting point of a dire situation a few years ago. It is tied by having put things in the manifesto which it feels unable to change. On the other hand, Labour also promised to make Britain the fastest growing economy in the G7 – an ambition which cannot be fulfilled by retaining major barriers to our main export market and the main source of our supply chains. It will not be possible to repair public finances without taking account of the

massive loss of tax revenue accrued as a result of Brexit. Recent debates about spending £2bn here or £3bn there are dwarfed by the £40bn lost to the exchequer every year as a direct result of leaving the EU.

Whilst there clearly are pressures on the government, we need to encourage them to meet their own stated ambitions. They need to begin to blur the red lines, thus paving the way to removing them in the future.

Maybe it will take another general election, but the longer they wait the greater the cost to the British economy. Economic reality should push the Labour government over the line and the more friendly encouragement it receives the better. Fear of public backlash over rejoining the EU should be gently fading. Tracker opinion polls as to whether we should rejoin the EU have been slowly but steadily moving in favour of rejoin, with over 60% now saying Brexit was a mistake compared with 30% who think it was not. This relentless movement is partly a result of demography but is also a cohort factor, both generational and regional. Leave voters who were not gung-ho Brexiteers genuinely believed the arguments that the vast amount of money saved would go to the NHS. They were promised advantageous trade deals to compensate for any lost EU trade. Indeed, it was categorically claimed that there would be no lost EU trade as we would retain full access to the Single Market. More and more people are coming to the knowledge that all these promises were nonsense. So as the trend continues, to 65% or 70% it becomes easier for the government to be less cautious about Europe. In private conversations with ministers, I have been encouraged to take the line of "let's see what we do with the reset ... within the red lines" However, my opinion is that the more government is encouraged to be bold, or at least less cautious, the better things will be.

Typhaine Morillon, The role of the the European Parliament Liaison Office in the UK

Typhaine's talk outlined the **role of the EU Office** and the **impact of the new government's proclaimed 'reset.'** She reminded her audience that Maroš Šefčovič was not yet confirmed as in charge of EU-UK relations, and that the EU's general approach would be clear only when the whole Commission was confirmed.

European Parliament activity was Typhaine's first topic. MEPs had recently had four meetings of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly (PPA), which gathers together 35 members of the European Parliament and 35 members of the House of Commons (21) and the House of Lords (14). This body oversees the implementation of the TCA withdrawal agreement and had previously met several times, and the International Trade Committee had visited Northern Ireland in 2022 and in 2023. Although the participation of three or four committees was not new, this was the first full meeting since the European elections, and offered a much wider scope. Three Committees including the Chairs (Foreign Affairs, International Trade, Sub-Committee on Security and Defence) were involved, each with a delegation of seven members plus staff from Brussels. After some

general joint meetings on the Monday, the following two days focused on individual committee areas. Over three days they met three ministers (Nick Thomas-Symonds, with Stephen Doughty and Lord Croker) and some of their parliamentary counterparts (Emily Thornberry, Lord Ricketts and Hilary Benn). There was a reception at the House of Lords and all three EU Chairs (all German but from different political parties) agreed that the 'mood music' was good. As for the 'lyrics', however, the most repeated refrain came from MEP David McAllister, Chair of the EU Foreign Affairs Committee: 'Now we just need to know what the government really, really, really wants.'

In other words, **what does 're-set' mean beyond the very positive vibes?** One important test is the Erasmus+ scheme and youth mobility. The EU has always said these are open doors despite the previous government's decision. Erasmus is very close to MEPs' and the Commission's heart. It was mentioned in almost every meeting, whether in Security and Defence, International Trade or Foreign Affairs. All four Chairs were very emotional about the idea that we cannot afford to have a lost generation and lost opportunities. David McAllister has British and German citizenship, and Bernd Lange (International Trade) spent time in the UK. They all had very personal memories and believed that nearly all of those who spend a year in the UK invariably become ambassadors for Britain. A strong desire to work together was also obvious in Security and Defence, whose Chair, Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, was in Kyiv just before coming to London. Her personal experience means she feels very strongly about UK-EU collaboration on defence.

The marked change of atmosphere in the Assembly since July has affected **the direction of the EU's liaison work in the UK**. Keeping the members of the European Parliament informed about developments in the UK became vital after the loss of youth mobility and the departure of so many British people from Brussels. Fewer and fewer people in the EU understand the UK and its recent politics. While promoting Erasmus+ and youth mobility was understandable from the EU viewpoint, it perhaps indicated inadequate understanding of how politically tricky it would be for the Labour government. In order to help the EU regain a fuller sense of the UK's changed political scene, the London office supports committees and delegations in both directions between the UK and Brussels. It also promotes liaison on an individual level. Sometimes, for example, MEPs come to the UK in a personal or individual capacity, or academics are invited to give lectures. Events can also be organised to meet fellow citizens.

Another key role is **helping EU citizens in the UK**. There are probably nearly 6 million living and working here. The changed situation after Brexit meant a lot of work on their human and political rights. The years 2022-24 were very busy with the European elections, because 2024 was very different from 2019, when a surprise European election allowed people to vote for British MEPs. In 2024 most EU citizens living in the UK did not realise that they could vote in their own country, albeit with different arrangements for each EU country: French people, for example, could vote at the embassy, Germans had to do postal votes, Italians had to fly home. It was important to raise awareness of these arrangements. Much effort goes into helping EU citizens' organisations in the UK, like The 3 Million or more community-based organisations. A big event in early November, for

example, was the third edition of the Citizens' Gathering in London. It brought together about 250 representatives, organisations, embassies and consulates to structure the network for ensuring citizens' rights in the UK.

Media work is another important aspect of the Office in London. Typhaine was well qualified to notice a huge difference since she arrived in 2020 in the middle of COVID. That made PR very difficult. The EU's London Office has now developed a good network of journalists, be they UK journalists or EU correspondents based in the UK. A press breakfast on Budget Day, for example, attracted 25 journalists, including the BBC. Fortunately, there is now a more positive interest in EU matters and the work of the London office. Here too the mood has definitely changed.

The **Youth Outreach Programme** is a particularly important feature of Typhaine's office. The aim is to create as many bridges as possible for young people so as to compensate for the loss of Erasmus and youth mobility. These 'bridges' include a two-hour educational session for any school that applies or weekly online work. Schools come to Europe House every week. The online sessions can lead to a much more demanding European Parliament Ambassador school programme, which started two years ago, post-Brexit. Most schools involved are in England, but the scheme is developing in Scotland, although so far no schools from Wales and Northern Ireland are involved. The EU office can now launch such a programme without accusations of brainwashing children, which was not possible during the referendum period. Over 60 schools across the UK in this network dedicate part of their curriculum to the EU and Europe in general. This close work with schools and teachers offers training and information about EU matters. However, a small team of 10 can only do so much, so sometimes it is a question of supporting friends in events and activities that they themselves organise. The office can co-organise events with organisations and make Europe House available for events organised by others. It is also possible to help find speakers. After reiterating the desire to facilitate liaison, Typhaine concluded by inviting listeners to spread the word about the work of the EU office and to get in touch if they need support.

Typhaine Morillon, Public Relations and Press Officer for the European Parliament Liaison Office in the UK

+44 (0)20 722 54336 +44 (0)77 860 60531
typhaine.morillon@europarl.europa.eu