

Notes from the public meeting on Brexit organised by Christophe Premat, MP for French people living in Northern Europe

3 November 2016, 18.00-20.00, Palace of Westminster

Also present and speaking:

- [Seb Dance, MEP for Greater London (Labour)
- [Diane Abbott, Shadow Home Secretary
- [Emily Thornberry, Shadow Foreign Secretary

Opening speeches

Christophe Premat

Before the referendum, from January-February, the sort of questions my constituents were asking me during MP surgeries at my constituency office or on the phone were around affiliated rights if Britain were to leave the EU: mostly practicalities of continued access to benefits, social security, etc. Obviously all very important questions.

From May-June, it had shifted to fundamental rights with the very sensitive question of citizenship rights, such as 'should I take British nationality?', 'should my husband apply for a French passport as a means of retaining link to the EU?'

In my visits to constituents outside London before the referendum vote, i.e. in Scotland and also Wales, I could see how frustrated people were. You only needed to leave London to realise that a leave result was likely.

And of course we had a dramatic campaign. We had the murder of Jo Cox, which resonated beyond the UK, in the French parliament too; it is unbelievable to think someone could be murdered for their political stance in 2016 Europe. A day before the referendum vote, a ceremony was organised in the French National Assembly in memory of Jo Cox.

The position of the French President now is that we have to respect the UK vote but seek political clarifications from the UK, especially after the speeches made during the Tory party conference. There is of course the question of the UK's relationship with the EU and the kind of relationship the UK retains with the EU afterwards; but the worry is also about the state of the EU: will Brexit have a boomerang effect? What about the future of the EU project? Brexit is not just something that happened in the UK; it's important to keep in mind the international context. The French position is that all aspects of the negotiations need to start at the same time. And in that respect as well as others, the news of the legal challenge decision is welcome.

A French committee in the National Assembly will examine the consequences of the vote for Britain, the EU and the French-UK relationship in particular. There is also a specific interest in the issue of French people living in the UK. Official figures put at 300-400k the number of French people living in the UK, and 200k UK citizens living in France; the ties run deep and reciprocity is important on tax, health, pensions etc. There is a strong bilateral relationship on social security, tax, defence, which must be preserved.

Brexit did not just happen to the UK. It is time to give more coherence to the EU project and build a progressive and social Europe.

Diane Abbott

The Government has no strategy because no one believed this could happen. The average

age of Tory activists is late 50s, and they are mostly anti EU. Cameron offered them a referendum as a sop. Theresa May now has the same problem, she needs to keep them quiet, and pressure to be hard does not come from the main British public, but from the activists. The truth about Brexit is that sectors after sectors are saying we need freedom of movement, including the NHS. Ending freedom of movement will destroy the health sector. The British economy has always relied and depended on freedom of movement and everyone in Brussels is saying it's not negotiable. There can be no access to single market without freedom of movement. It would be wrong in principle as well as in practice. I'm a defender of migrants, freedom of movement and the single market.

I always thought Theresa May was not stupid, and that she didn't really want a hard Brexit, but maybe she does. Certainly a bomb was thrown today with the High Court judgement. You may think it strange that it took lawyers to tell us Parliament has to have a vote on article 50, and they will appeal. But we'll have final decision by Christmas. Having a vote is a good thing: at the very least there will be a vote on the terms of the exit.

The reality is people in Brussels are fed up with the UK's attitude, and there is a risk of Theresa May misjudging the mood. Personally I am very committed to defending freedom of movement and the rights of EU citizens, and their contribution to the UK economy and society. We should get assurances from Government as soon as possible on the rights of established EU citizens. You should know now where you stand and should not be part of the negotiations. This is important for people on a personal level as well as for their friends and family, and their employers.

Seb Dance

First of all I want to say that you are not only French citizens - you are Londoners. The reality of Brexit, "titanic success" notwithstanding, is a complete betrayal of the promises of the leave campaign for a more open, more outward-looking and welcoming Britain. It has nothing to offer. There are still some who think the UK can pick and choose, have their cake and eat it. That's not the case. Keeping freedom of movement has to be the basis of the negotiation. Switzerland is going through very difficult times trying to reconcile the irreconcilable after the referendum vote where people voted in favour of ending freedom of movement. This is exactly the same situation we're in.

I represent everyone that lives in London, regardless of nationality, language, religion, etc. You live here, you work here, you pay your taxes here and we'll defend your rights.

In the EU Parliament there is a sense that the UK has overplayed their hand for too long; we had a fantastic deal and walked away from it and so there is a very genuine sense of betrayal over this. It is a delicate time geopolitically: Russia, Trump, the rise of the far right. People's fears are being exploited by those who want to return to closed borders and nationalism. But we must not be blind to the political chaos that would ensue if Parliament voted against article 50. There would be social unrest – however, triggering article 50 will also cause distress and resentment.

I am seeing Guy Verhofstadt next week and I will stress that London has a duty to its multicultural residents to ensure openness, freedom of movement and passporting for the financial industry.

The lies of the Daily Mail, the Express and the Sun will melt in the face of reality, but this will not happen before March. I am under no illusion that Brexit will go through and we have to proceed on that understanding but I will definitely put the case for as much openness as possible to Guy Verhofstadt.

Q&A

Q: I am concerned by the lukewarm campaign Labour led for Remain; what will happen if the Labour leader does not tell his MPs to vote against article 50?

Seb Dance: I can assure you that in London there was a lot of very active campaigning for Remain, both as Labour and under the Stronger In banner. True, the party is divided and it is

a concern to me; but Diane Abbott said she would champion freedom of movement and I have to believe this is the view of the leadership too. To the left, the party is pushing for freedom of movement and to the right it is more concerned about single market but the reality is you can't have one without the other. Labour Party members want freedom of movement & access to single market and Labour leadership must be much stronger about both. Whatever comes next must not destroy the economy.

Q: What is the legitimacy of the referendum when over 1 million UK citizens were disenfranchised?

Christophe Premat: We also had a question of legitimacy in France at the time of the referendum on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. This referendum was not about remaining or exiting the EU but about the EU constitution. French people voted no in the referendum but then a few years later, the treaty was actually ratified. From the French experience, we need to be careful not to divorce what people want from what happens in Parliament as this will only lead to an unbalance in the European project. There is still some resentment over the Lisbon Treaty in France. We need to have an increase in collective responsibility for our decisions.

Q: I've heard lots of positive talk and it's good to feel appreciated but where is the action? And what would you do in our place, would you apply for UK citizenship?

Seb Dance: Of course! Being British is great! Seriously the loonies and extremists get all the airtime and us MEP hardly any, but there are more of us than there are of them, and we are raising your concerns in the EU all the time. The truth is that none of us should be put in that position. I think the next generation should be able to go and live in Europe and the UK, not just this generation.

Christophe Premat: It is best to apply for a permanent residence card and not just because of Brexit. But this is clearly a painful process. I cannot encourage anyone to take a citizenship for practical reasons. Citizenship is about your relationship to a country. What I would encourage you to do though is to send your ID in place of your passport when applying for official documentations from the Home Office as applications for permanent residence card might take 6 months.

Q: Can we count on the French government to negotiate with the UK government to guarantee reciprocity of rights?

Christophe Premat: Yes, we absolutely need to strengthen bilateral agreements and relationships. France's position is that freedom of movement is not negotiable. It would not make sense to do so; it is not the way the EU project was built. I'm a little bit ashamed when I hear talks of trying to get the City to move to Paris or Frankfurt. This is not what the EU is about, the EU is about human beings and their rights.

Q: Will permanent residency post Brexit give us the same rights as it does now?

Seb Dance: I would say, do get permanent residency if you can but I will fight to see you don't have to. As arduous as it seems, obtaining permanent residency is worth doing.

Q: Apart from becoming British, and why should we when we are clearly not wanted, what should we 'bargaining chips' be doing?

Seb Dance: First of all, I must apologise for my country, this is disgraceful. I never thought I'd see the day when my Government would use such language - but you are wanted, you are not bargaining chips. 52% did not vote against immigration, so many had other reasons. There is not one Brexit, all that referendum achieved is legitimise and unleash a nasty minority anti-immigration view. I sincerely hope no other civilised country makes the same mistake because they will probably also suffer the same.

(Emily Thornberry arrived.)

Speech

Emily Thornberry

In my constituency, (Islington South & Finsbury), there are so many people French people in that it is worth for the French Socialist party to come and canvas them door-to-door (even though at first I thought they were Lib-Dems!). Many of those people, who I represent and who can come and see me with their issues, have no right to vote here - yet they live here, work here and pay tax here. This is an outrage - the world has changed. All residents should be able to vote.

We have to accept the referendum result even if it was based on lies; but we have to exit in a way that defends the best interests of Britain. The first and foremost responsibility of any government is the security and safety of its people. The second is to look after the economy. We have a responsibility to the economy. What our relationship to the EU should be was not on the ballot paper so it is not right that a minority should dictate those terms. A legitimate government should represent everyone including the 48%, and including the EU citizens living here. Theresa May should go to the EU and speak on behalf of the whole UK but she cannot do that on the back of no mandate.

At least 600,000 voted for Jeremy Corbyn - and look what an uproar that caused! But not one person voted for May and we are supposed to trust her? She's said nothing apart from all the hard talk at the party conference, which caused a lot of upset in Brussels. We have a lot of questions for Davies and for Gove and for Fox but they do not answer. How can we have accountability if they say nothing? This is not the basis on which I am willing to sacrifice the future of my children.

They talk about keeping their cards close to their chest, but it is a sign of an incompetent Government who have nothing to say.

As far as practicalities the legal advice I have gathered that I can pass on to you is to apply for permanent residency if you can. This does not resolve the issue of students who are contributing a lot of diversity and income to this country, and my constituency has a lot of those. At present we cannot offer guarantees beyond 2018 that they would not have to pay higher overseas fees, and this is a lot of uncertainty to deal with for those who apply. How much goodwill does the UK get throughout the world from people who studied here in their youth? You just cannot buy that kind of goodwill and we are about to throw it all away.

Q&A

Q: Is there a viable option for Labour and Lib Dems to not stand against each other at a general election to present a united anti-Brexit option?

Seb Dance: At by-elections and European elections it is certainly worth working together.

Emily Thornberry: in our "first past the post" system we have a coalition on each side: Labour on the left and the Conservatives on the right, with a few other parties. So others should join in and not expect Labour to stand down. However somehow with the Lib Dems it always seems to mean that Labour should make way for them. The reality is many areas voted Leave because they felt left out of the "economic miracle" - so if we have to leave then we must do it while looking after the economy and we have to be mindful of that message.

Q: Is there still a possibility that Brexit may not happen? In any case isn't it time for the pro-EU movement to get organised and become a force to rival the euro-skeptics? This is a once in a generation issue which should go beyond party politics - surely the stakes are high enough?

Seb Dance: The clear division in politics is between complete fantasists who trade on fears and realists who try to address real issues. We cannot underestimate the anger of the former, even looking at their reaction following today's decision, but an economic meltdown will lead

to even more anger in the longer term. We must ensure that the blame for that, should it happen lays squarely, where it belongs and is not deflected.

Christophe Premat: The best dream I have for the EU is that we stop being on the defensive - we need to be proactive and address the things that are wrong and take more of an approach like the Swiss cantons; the Common European project is paramount. We cannot have a Europe à la carte.

Q: Theresa May might have no mandate but I am worried about the very vocal support she gets in the Daily Mail. How do we deal with that?

Emily Thornberry: First of all, make sure you have your permanent residency and nobody can touch you after that - no matter how nasty a Brexit we get. And who cares about Daily Mail? You get used to it - they've been out to get us for ages and we're still here! Also, I don't think people really believe what's in the Daily Mail - but I do think they believe in the broadcast media and I'm more worried about the bias we've been seeing there. But the wheels will turn – British politics are on steroid right now, and May is still a young PM but the honeymoon will be over.

Q: How can we negotiate anything after we rejected the EU so thoroughly? Especially when it seems we are mostly worried about our borders - surely out means out?

Seb Dance: What we need to get is that the integrity of the EU is paramount to the 27 - we won't get far with negotiation until we understand that. Just after the referendum, the mood in Brussels was mostly sad, people were telling us how sorry they were to see us leave. Now the mood has changed and they are mostly angry.