



CENTRE FOR DEMOCRACY
AND PEACE BUILDING

EU Debate NI

Summary Report:

Queens Student's Union Event 24th February 2016

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1. Background

The Centre for Democracy and Peace Building recently held the second of a series of events to stimulate and facilitate an informed debate on the issues that must be considered in the Referendum on continued European Union membership. The event was hosted by Queens University Belfast and attended by its students and students from the University of Ulster.

The event was opened by Conor Houston, Programme Director and compered by Shane Todd. To kick off the event each speaker was given two minutes to put their case forward for remaining in or leaving the EU. This was followed by interactive discussion between students, speakers and other members of the public as to the issues Northern Ireland must consider in the upcoming Referendum on whether the UK should remain in or leave the EU. Speakers included:

1. Dr Leslie Budd, Reader in Social Enterprise at the Open University Business School
2. Hugo MacNeill, Chairman, British-Irish Association
3. Professor David Phinnemore, Head of School of Politics, Queens University Belfast
4. David McNarry, MLA, UKIP
5. Duncan Morrow, Lecturer and director of Community Engagement, University of Ulster
6. Claire Hanna, MLA, SDLP
7. Declan Kearney, National Chairperson, Sinn Fein
8. Alderman Christopher Salford, Democratic Unionist Party

This document provides a short summary of some of the discussion that took place.

2. Key Findings

A. Narrow focus on particular issues

There was a feeling amongst some that currently the debate has been focused on particular areas, such as budgets and trade and that there were wider issues, such as education opportunities and cultural identity that ought to be addressed.

B. EU role in Peace

Several speakers held the view that Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement and peace process as a whole was closely tied to the UK's membership of the EU. In addition some argued that the EU had been instrumental in the peace that had largely prevailed in Europe following 1945.

C. Trade

Trade was identified by several participants as an important factor in deciding whether to vote to leave or stay. Several argued that trade with the EU following a Brexit would be much more difficult and that thousands of jobs in Northern Ireland that depended on EU membership could be lost. For others a Brexit would not halt trade, rather the markets would continue to function and the UK's energy would drive it towards success. A further opinion was expressed that the EU had adopted a neo-liberal attitude that benefited big business and not the majority of people.

D. Monetary support

The Common Agricultural Policy was identified by some as an important source of funding for Northern Ireland farmers. Others believed the CAP disproportionately supported large continental farmers. They believed that the CAP would be maintained by the British treasury post-Brexit and that, in any case, it held back Northern Irish farmers and a Brexit would allow them to export more easily.

E. Education

Education was an important factor for many of those present. There was concern around ensuring that students from Northern Ireland had the best education and research opportunities possible and that they would continue to receive funding to help them undertake these endeavours. Some felt that remaining within the EU provided the best opportunities for this and that it provided important opportunities for social mobility.

F. An outward looking society

There was a view that, in order for Northern Ireland to remain competitive and outward looking, it was beneficial to remain within the EU. Some highlighted the fact that people from Northern Ireland benefited from the experience of working in other countries. Furthermore some felt that the introduction of restrictions on movement across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, if this was imposed following a Brexit, would be detrimental to North-South relations. Others pointed out that opportunities for movement and gathering international experience would be available even if the UK left the EU.

G. Self-determination and cooperation

An opinion was expressed that it was superior to remain within the EU in order to change the institutions from within. They saw the cooperation, on social issues and climate change, as an important benefit and that leaving the EU was seen as replacing current problems with much worse ones. In contrast with this view there was a sentiment that the EU limited the ability of the UK to exercise self-determination. They felt that the EU did not act in the interest of Northern Ireland and was dominated by Germany. In particular they believed the European Commissioners hold unaccountable power in their role of presenting legislation. For this group nation states provided a more accountable form of democracy than the EU. A cost benefit analysis, in their opinion, indicated that an exit would be more beneficial.

H. Immigration

Both those who were in favour of leaving the EU and those who were in favour of staying made the point that immigration might not be at the centre of the debate if it were not for the emergence of UKIP. For some immigration was felt to be a non-issue that UKIP had brought to the fore while for others immigration was a key issue for many and that UKIP had simply responded to voter demand. For some the 'hordes' of immigrants wandering the continent demonstrated the serious problems with the EU, while for others the migrant crisis was one that was better dealt with in an EU context.

3. Analysis of Open Comment Forms

As part of the event participants were given the opportunity to voluntarily complete some short open-ended questions. This section summarises the 14 responses that we received.

What do you believe would be the benefits of a vote to REMAIN IN the European Union?

Benefit	Number of times mentioned
Better employment / education prospects	5
European legislation e.g. CAP, labour legislation, human rights	4
Trade	3
Tried and tested / stability	3
Freedom of movement / benefits of immigration / Able to deal with immigration together	2
UK has more influence in EU / stronger together	2
Diversity / culture	2
A higher power to protect citizens	2
Better opportunities for reform from inside the EU	2
EU funding	1
Peace in Northern Ireland	1

Unsurprisingly employment and education featured most highly in the thinking of those who were present at this event as a large number of the attendees were students. A number of other areas such as the importance of European legislation, particularly the CAP, Trade and the fact that the EU is a tried and tested system were also mentioned a number of times as persuasive reasons for remaining in the EU. Other areas such as the cultural aspects of the EU and the idea that the EU would be easier to reform from within were also mentioned multiple times while the role of the EU in providing peace and funding were each only mentioned once.

What do you believe would be the benefits of a vote to LEAVE the European Union?

Benefit	Number of times mentioned
Want to hear more leave arguments / don't know any leave arguments	4
Sovereignty of UK laws / accountability	3
UK to control own destiny	3
Reduction in eurocrat class / hasten end of EU	2
UK makes own trade deals	1
More flexibility	1
Greater chance of a lasting socialist government in the UK	1
UK will not be involved in a another bail-out	1
Expose the problems with the EU	1

The largest group here made known their feelings that either they believed there were no good arguments to leave or that they simply had not heard them yet. A desire to see sovereignty of UK laws, and thus accountability for those laws, was seen as a persuasive argument for leaving the EU, as was the argument that, outside the EU, the UK was perceived to have better control over its own destiny. While the demise of the EU and thus the 'eurocrat class' also received more than one mention other reasons, including an ability for the UK to make their own trade deals, only received one mention. Interestingly one person identified the higher possibility of a UK socialist government as a persuasive reason to leave the EU.

Which three areas relevant to Northern Ireland, would you like to receive more information about before you vote in the EU referendum?

Area relevant to Northern Ireland	Number of times mentioned
CAP / employment / equality / other legislation	7
Trade deals / barriers	3
Impact on economy / jobs	3
Funding loss / replacement / allocation	2
NI post Brexit: impact and benefits / negative effects	2
Border control	2
The cost of leaving	2
Freedom of movement	2
Impacts on rights	2
UK constitutional issues e.g. scotland	2
Social / cultural dimension	1
Fate of particular geographical areas (e.g. Newry)	1
What the process of exiting would look like	1
Ensuring the debate does not become divided along unionist / nationalist lines	1
Information as to the chances of EU democratic reform	1
Foreign relations post-Brexit	1
Benefits post-Brexit	1
Provision of health while abroad post-Brexit	1

The area most frequently mentioned was a desire to be provided with more information around how EU legislation affects the UK, particularly the impact on agriculture and the CAP, employment and equality. Unsurprisingly trade and the economy also figured highly while lower down the list were an interest in more information on the prospect of border controls between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and more information on the impact on constitutional issues such as the possibility of Scotland voting to leave the UK.

