



CENTRE FOR DEMOCRACY
AND PEACE BUILDING

EU Debate NI

Summary Report:

Belfast City Hall Event on 5th February 2016

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1. Background

The Centre for Democracy and Peace Building recently held an event in Belfast to stimulate and facilitate an informed debate with citizens across Northern Ireland on the issues that must be considered in the Referendum on continued EU membership.

The event was chaired by Tara Mills and opened by the Deputy Lord Mayor. The sessions involved an interactive and informed round-table discussion of the issues Northern Ireland must consider in the upcoming UK Referendum on whether the UK should remain in or leave the EU. Ten tables heard from three key-note speakers, discussing and debating with each in turn for about 20 minutes. Speakers included:

Speakers:

David Gavaghan (Chair, Confederation of British Industry Northern Ireland)

Sue McAllister (Director-General, Northern Ireland Prison Service)

Andrew McCracken (Chief Executive, Community Foundation)

Anton McGonnell (Representative, Young Influencers)

Tina McKenzie (Chief Executive, Diamond Recruitment)

Jane Morrice (Former Vice President, European Economic & Social Committee)

Michael Shaw (Official, Leave.EU)

Dr Anthony Soares (Deputy Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies)

Dr Joanne Stuart (Director of Development, Northern Ireland Science Park)

Deirdre Heenan (Pro Vice Chancellor Communication and Provost Coleraine and Magee, Ulster University)

Vilma Patterson (Chair of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland)

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

2. Key Findings

A. Lack of information and abundance of uncertainty

One of the key issues raised actively by many of the groups' participants was the lack of information in general terms available to voters on the arguments pertinent to the EU debate. In turn, there is much uncertainty around key questions such as the legal status of the UK during an interim period. This issue of uncertainty was important in a number of groups. In one group where members were generally in favour of remaining many felt that an argument of 'better the devil you know' was not a robust enough reason to remain, they wanted more information to back up their reasoning. They wanted more of a media focus, such as has been seen in the US presidential elections, in order to have a structured debate with the arguments, and implications of leaving, clearly set out. In general most participants wanted more factual information.

'There's so much [stuff] flying around no-one knows what to believe....there's a lot of speculation.'

"People need to know what it means for them and local issues."

'How can you vote on something when you don't know anything about it?'

There was some emphasis by respondents wanting to understand what the EU has contributed / does contribute to Northern Ireland and some felt few people know, for example, which projects the EU has funded. A participant pointed out that the Republic of Ireland, having had experience of several European referendums, understood how vital it was that people were well informed. People rarely seek out the information themselves, rather the information needs to be printed and handed to them as opposed to 'languishing' on websites.

B. Engagement versus apathy

Some respondents were particularly concerned that sections of the population weren't engaging in the debate.

Young people were cited as an example with several participants indicating that their children were apathetic as to the outcome of the debates because the issues were not being constructed in terms that they related to. It was speculated that young people would feel the affects of changes perhaps more than others in the longer term with students, for example, seeing changes to exam recognition in Europe, facing greater difficulties travelling or problems in taking part in exchange or grant funded programmes.

"When they drive on the EU funded road they are saying 'this takes 10 minutes off my drive' as opposed to 'this road was built from European money'."

'My 16, 18 and 20 year old sons don't care about the referendum but if you told them their Sky TV was threatened they'd be out the door [to vote]!'

C. The debate could be become ‘Green versus Orange’

Some participants were sceptical that Northern Ireland politicians could have this debate without the issue being split along old community lines. This issue was highlighted in light of the EU referendum vote being held close to elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and David Cameron’s response that residents would be able to differentiate between these votes intellectually. There was unease that David Cameron was not listening to the concerns about holding the referendum near assembly elections and that the Northern Ireland voice was not being listened to in Westminster generally. Participants feared that the assembly elections could be influenced by this issue and that the EU referendum campaign here could turn into a ‘Green versus Orange’ debate along tribal lines, with nationalists voting to remain and unionists voting to leave. The feeling around the discussion tables was that it ought not to be about Northern Ireland’s own party politics but about the wider issues.

D. Immigration

It was considered that Europe provides opportunities for people to work abroad and for skilled labour to enter the country, although it was pointed out that these opportunities could be gained without being part of the EU.

Some participants perceived that the UK’s inability to control immigration from the EU restricts opportunities for other immigrants. The case of an American, who had a job offer but was denied a visa in the UK, was used as an example of this. It was felt that voting to leave could open up better avenues for highly skilled immigrants from countries outside the EU.

Economically, the argument was made that Northern Ireland’s food industry gains from the availability of cheap labour in the form of EU migrants, labour that this successful sector could not survive without. This was countered by highlighting the issue of cheap unskilled labour lowering wages for others across Northern Ireland – and that a leave vote would not close the door to this labour.

Another area of comment was the lack of information as to the status of UK citizens living in EU countries in the event of a leave vote.

E. Cultural and emotional factors

Several groups felt that, currently, the debate is focused around the economy, immigration, benefit claimants and the cost of the EU. There was a feeling amongst the participants that the emotional and cultural factors would come to the fore much more prominently as the debate progressed and that there would be more engagement with questions like ‘what does it mean to be British or European?’ One group in particular felt that scaremongering tactics were another form of emotional appeal that could persuade people into voting a certain way on polling day.

F. Monetary support

The Common Agricultural Policy was discussed and identified as a concern for both the leave and remain camps. Several groups discussed that, while EU money that goes towards supporting the CAP does in theory come from the UK, there was no guarantee that the UK treasury, following a vote to leave the EU, would sign off on a similar policy.

In addition to the CAP, participants highlighted other grants available to Northern Ireland, such as grants for research, which it was considered could dry up in the event of a UK exit. There was also some debate as to whether Northern Ireland currently makes best use of the grants available to it and a view that the Republic of Ireland's ability to do this was better.

There was a suggestion, in one group, that many felt that little had changed as a result of EU money coming in and that often, arguably, people from Northern Ireland were not getting value for money. Some groups had members that highlighted the fact that the cost of remaining as a member of the EU was greater than the funding that was received in return with another person reporting that, for every £1.50 Northern Ireland paid to the EU, £1.00 was received in funding. There was also some disillusionment with the bureaucracy associated with EU funding / being part of the EU.

'There has been a lot of money wasted from Europe.'

'If we step out of the EU who becomes the benefactor? Who picks up the tab.'

'There's an increasing number of companies saying it would be better for Britain to be out of EU, they think they'll still be able to trade.'

'We're only getting back a third of what we're putting in – we're putting in £55 million a day, there was a £1.7 billion demand just before Christmas 2014.'

"I think that the bureaucracy from Europe needs to be addressed."

G. Trade

Trade was an important issue raised for discussion - one of the speakers argued that the UK should be able to make its own trade deals with emerging economies and that this would improve long term prospects for the UK with the EU's share of world trade, as a bloc, set to decline from 34% to 23% over the next number of years. Amongst the groups there was concern over trade with the possibility of a withdrawal of larger firms for example American trading firms, should there be a Brexit, worrying one group and with big businesses in general also cited as a group for whom the landscape would look more uncertain.

It was considered that costs would be incurred nationally in developing and debating new legislation and that it would cost to trade in Europe (if there was a leave vote). It was suggested that there is learning from the Swiss/Norway circumstances in terms of how countries outside the EU interact with it legislatively.

'Big businesses are already getting nervous. There is a lack of clarity around what post exit would look like.'

H. The Leave and Remain campaigns

There was some discussion of the merits of both the Leave and Remain campaigns. Some felt that the print media, particularly tabloids, are eurosceptic and were being driven by the Leave campaign.

There was some comment that the Remain campaign is yet to get going whilst the Leave campaign is already full steam ahead. There was a sense that the Remain activists have been less active and need to be more vocal. There was also a perception amongst some that the Remain campaign is more divided.

One group highlighted their surprise that the Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership was not currently an issue of greater importance. The lack of a leftist argument for leaving the European Union, such as its perceived favouring of business over workers, was brought up along with views that the Remain campaign had been lacklustre and it was felt that pressure within the left as a movement, where arguments for leaving the EU can result in their proponents being branded as 'racists', had contributed to this.

I. Border

There was uncertainty around what the border with the Republic of Ireland would look like and how changes to the relationship with the EU would affect the Northern Ireland peace process. It was considered that for companies that rely on freedom of movement and trade with the Republic there would be repercussions for leaving the EU.

'The Good Friday Agreement was written on the basis of joint continued membership – there would be consequence in relation to the relationship between north and south, passport controls, border controls, costs etc.'

J. Other areas

Other key areas raised as part of the debate included:

- the ramifications of a leave vote on employment law
- the ramifications of a leave vote on human rights law
- the moral role of the UK to support EU refugees

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 32 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
Trade	10
Freedom of movement / benefits of immigration / Able to deal with immigration together	9
EU Funding	7
European legislation e.g. CAP, labour legislation, human rights	6
Tried and tested / stability	6
UK has more influence in EU / stronger together	6
Diversity	5
Peace in NI	4
Foreign Direct Investment	3
Better Employment / Education prospects	3
Cohesion of UK	3
Support for NI economy specifically	2
Collaboration	2
Better security inside EU	2
Stated no reason to remain or additional reasons to leave	2
Political Union	1
Social dimension	1
Able to share a border with ROI	1
Liberty	1

Base = 27

It is notable that the economic benefits of remaining make up the top categories in the analysis table above. Trade was the most mentioned benefit of staying within the EU mentioned by just over a third of those who filled in this section of the qualitative form. Just behind was 'freedom of movement' and the associated benefits that this brings to the UK including skilled workers. The benefits of retaining EU funding for Northern Ireland received seven mentions in third while the importance of European legislation was fourth.

A number of other factors, as the table shows, were mentioned. These included the importance of maintaining the UK's influence within Europe and on the world stage and the fact that Europe has been 'tried and tested' and thus provides stability. Other factors, such as the influence of the EU on diversity, the Northern Ireland peace process and better UK cohesion also feature.

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

Benefit	Number of times mentioned
Cease contributions to Europe	7
Stated no reason to leave or additional reason to remain	7
Sovereignty of UK laws / accountability	6
Control borders / immigration	5
UK makes own trade deals	5
Less regulation	1
Move away from political union	1
UK to Control own destiny	1
Fewer restrictions on non-EU immigrants	1
Don't have to listen to Eurosceptic any longer	1
Reclaim fishing rights	1
Avoid deals that don't suit NI	1

Base = 20

Four benefits of leaving the European Union seem to feature most prominently here: the ceasing of contributions, with some arguing that the UK loses out financially to Europe, the opportunity to re-establish the sovereignty of Britain's legislation, the right to control borders and thus immigration and the UK's ability to conduct it's own trade deals without being dictated to by the EU. Interestingly, these were the only four areas that received multiple mentions.

A variety of other reasons to leave were cited, including the opportunity for removing restrictions on non-EU migrants, less regulation from Brussels and movement away from political union. However, each was only mentioned once.

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
Funding loss / replacement / allocation	9
CAP / employment / equality / other legislation	9
Trade deals / barriers	7
Impact on economy / jobs	5
Border / relationship with the Republic	5
NI post Brexit: impact and benefits / negative effects	5
Social / cultural dimension	4
Blank	4
Trade agreement post Brexit / cost of leaving	2
Trade unions	2
How to encourage exit	2
Border Control	1
Fate of particular geographical areas (e.g. Newry)	1
The cost of leaving	1
State Aid rules	1
The 'Norway model'	1
Autonomy for NI in UK vote	1
Further integration	1
Immigration	1
David Cameron's Remain deal	1
What the process of exiting would look like	1

Base = 28

*Where participants listed more than three areas only the first three they wrote were included.

Two issues score top here and perhaps unsurprisingly they are centred on funding and legislation. Particularly in Northern Ireland these are two of the most fraught and complicated areas of debate. Where the Leave campaign argue that the UK and Northern Ireland put more money into Europe than they get out, the Remain campaign are keen to emphasise how well Northern Ireland does from EU funding. In terms of legislation where many are aware of the arguments in favour of greater sovereignty they are also acutely aware of the importance of EU legislation, such as the CAP, for Northern Ireland. They are therefore seeking more of the hard facts around these areas.

Other areas where respondents would like more information include: the impact a Brexit would have on the economy, the relationship with the Republic of Ireland, what Northern Ireland

would look like post-Brexit and what trade deals the UK / Northern Ireland would be able to negotiate. The relationship with the Republic of Ireland may feature more prominently here due to the focus of the question on Northern Ireland specifically.