



*Better Together?
Northern Ireland and the EU*



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CENTRE FOR DEMOCRACY
AND PEACE BUILDING

EU Debate NI

Competing Visions Town Hall Style Event

Belfast, 2nd June 2016

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1. Background

The Centre for Democracy and Peace Building recently held an event in Riddel Hall in Belfast to stimulate and facilitate an informed debate with people from Northern Ireland on the issues that matter to them in the Referendum on continued EU membership. The event was sponsored by Northern Ireland Environment Link.

The event was compered by Tara Mills and consisted of a series of presentations by four speakers followed by a question and answers session for the audience and an examination of recent polling data.

Speakers:

Lee Reynolds (Regional Co-ordinator, Vote Leave Campaign)

Owen Patterson MP (Former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland)

Claire Hanna MLA (SDLP)

Glyn Roberts (Vice-Chair, NI Stronger IN)

This document provides a short summary of some of the points that were raised during the session.

2. Event

Introduction by Craig McGuicken (CEO NI Environment Link)

Craig outlined the importance of the debate for the environment sector, the membership of NI Environment Link and for other sectors. NI Environment Link is keen to see increased awareness of the issues amongst the general public and to ensure that a diverse range of views are heard as to how leaving or remaining in the EU will impact Northern Ireland and the UK.

Introduction to the CDPB EU Debate Toolkit by Conor Houston

This was the sixth and final event held by the Centre for Democracy and Peace Building and Conor highlighted the CDPB EU Debate Toolkit, a resource to allow voters access to a wide range of resources and materials from both sides of the debate. It can be viewed through the link below:

<http://eudebateni.org/referendum/>

Speakers

Each of the speakers opened with a short five-minute statement outlining their views on the central issues and what they believed a possible Brexit would look like for the UK and Northern Ireland in particular.

Owen Patterson MP

Owen Patterson argued that the European Union was a project designed by its founders to create a supra-national state. He pointed to the 'Five President's Report', a 2015 document which he contested laid out their priorities clearly; monetary, fiscal and political union of EU states by 2025. In his view the UK, as it would never join the Euro or sign up to the Schengen Agreement, would have a dangerous status in such an organisation and would be consistently outvoted.

While he wished the EU well with their project he argued that such a currency union is not feasible. In addition he claimed that the European economies have been stagnating and that, while Britain's exports to the EU have remained steady, exports to the rest of the world have increased by 43%.

For him, the UK's future is increasingly going to be decided at the world level, in organisations on which the UK has no independent voice as they are represented by the EU.

In his view the Common Agricultural Policy is unsatisfactory and the UK could organise a better scheme independently. Returning to trade he pointed out that five million EU jobs depend on sales to the UK and claimed that it is ludicrous to imagine that companies, such as Nissan, who have invested large amounts in their UK operations, would move operations elsewhere. He also set out his view that both France and Germany, whose governments will be facing elections in 2017, would have an interest in conducting trade deals with the UK quickly to ensure they did not upset these constituencies.

He finished by stating his view that Northern Ireland would have the 'best of everything' - with Corporation Tax reduced Northern Ireland would be able to compete with the Republic of Ireland.

Claire Hanna MLA

Claire Hanna opened by arguing that one in eight jobs in Northern Ireland rely on the EU and that membership is worth £1 billion to the economy. For her, policies around the CAP and the modernisation of the fishing industry had benefited Northern Ireland, particularly as the Northern Ireland farming sector is somewhat different to that of the UK. In her view after a Brexit trading relationships would be difficult to re-establish and red tape would still exist when selling to EU markets. She rejected any notion that the UK would be able to negotiate itself a 'sweetheart deal' after voting to leave.

For Claire the Leave Campaign has stopped addressing economic arguments and has begun to focus on immigration. She urged the remain campaign to make a positive case for the benefits of migration, such as their contributions to the public purse, and pointed out that losing EU regulations could mean losing a range of positive regulations around many areas including safety and the environment.

Claire wished to know where, in the event of a Brexit, border controls would be imposed. She felt that the positive relationship between Northern Ireland, the UK and the Republic of Ireland could be damaged by a vote to leave the EU. For her the EU has been a successful peace-building organisation and in her view problems around tax, climate and humanitarian crises are better solved at a global level in organisations like the EU than at a national level. She was reminded of a quote from Tony Jute that 'the opposite of communism is not capitalism it is Europe'.

Lee Reynolds

For Lee it was important to return the debate to a set of core principles and he identified five of these:

1. He felt that there is currently a democratic deficit where people in Northern Ireland are unable to control their own affairs on issues like VAT and leaving the EU would allow control over issues like this.
2. Lee argued that the UK has contributed more to the EU than the amount of money that has been cut from public services through austerity. Leaving the EU would mean more money to be spread over these services.
3. For Lee the issue of immigration was important and he characterised the debate in terms of supply and demand, arguing that, currently, the UK's public services cannot cope with the number of residents in the UK; a population that is higher than they had planned for.
4. Lee was confident that Northern Ireland would continue, through the Barnett Formula and the efforts of local politicians, to obtain a good share of money from Westminster.

5. He pointed out that the UK was not benefiting from the EU's greatest selling point, access to a large market of 500 million people, because the UK runs a massive trade deficit with the EU. His vision was of a global future with goods from Northern Ireland going to countries outside the EU.

Glyn Roberts

For Glyn the question to ask about the EU is how to reform it, not how to leave it. In his view the environmental and economic case for remaining is strong and there is substantial mutual gain in terms of the economy.

He cited a number of sources and statistics, including a recent report by the Centre for Business and Economics Research, which claimed that in the manufacturing industry membership of the EU would create 100,000 jobs with 3,500 of those in Northern Ireland. Seven 'Dragons' (from the Popular TV show 'Dragon's Den') and Sir Alan Sugar recently indicated that they supported remaining in the EU. Five out of the six main political parties in Northern Ireland, trade unions, the Prime Ministers of Commonwealth countries, the President of the United States and Hilary Clinton all also back remaining in the EU.

In Glyn's opinion 'risk is bad for business' and he claimed remaining in the EU would be better for the 26,000 businesses that rely on EU trade as well as other small firms that can thrive in the EU market. In the EU these businesses do not have to worry about barriers to trade and have unfettered access to the market. According to Glyn customers also benefit from low prices and remaining is the option of certainty while a vote to leave is a leap in the dark.

Audience Questions

Trade

An audience member indicated that the NI Affairs Committee had spent six weeks gathering evidence around the subject of Brexit. Through the course of this work it had interviewed several economists who had predicted that renegotiating trade deals with the EU could take between five and fifteen years and he asked for the panel's view on this.

Owen Patterson argued that the UK would have two years to negotiate these deals and that the EU would not take decisions that would damage their own domestic industries and would conclude negotiations in this time. He also argued that a satisfactory arrangement would be reached with regards to the Common Travel Area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

A further audience member asked for clarification around the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Agreement (TTIP) and Owen Patterson stated his belief that this trade deal will not happen.

Border controls

This same audience member also raised the issue of border controls and whether these would be put in place at Stranraer and other ports / airports connecting Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Owen Patterson did not see this as a problem claiming that new technologies would ensure there was minimal disruption while Claire Hanna claimed that it is inconsistent to claim that immigration from the EU to the UK can be drastically reduced without putting some restrictions on the only land border between the EU and the UK.

Immigration

Owen Patterson argued that the impact of immigration has been real, that there have been benefits but it has also put pressure on public services. In his view the original Treaty of Rome that set the precedent for free movement of labour, and was later followed by the Lisbon Treaty, was not originally envisaged as a step to free movement of all people. In his view some industries suffer from an inability to recruit skilled labour from outside the EU.

Claire Hanna argued that the leave campaign argument against immigration has been inconsistent, as they want to continue to trade goods but not see free movement of people. For her lack of funding for public services is due to austerity not due to immigration.

Financial Services

An audience member asked how a Brexit would affect the UK financial services industry.

Owen Patterson stated his belief that the UK financial services industry would continue to thrive with London as the premier financial centre and most efficient place to do business in Europe.

Erasmus

An audience member pointed out that 200,000 UK students go on ERASMUS placements every year, 125,000 EU students study, currently, in the UK and 15% of all academic staff in UK are from the EU and asked why would anyone working in Higher Education want to leave the EU.

Lee argued that one doesn't have to be an EU member to access some of these schemes and that a global academic model is a better model. He also argued that a remain vote did not guarantee any certainty as the EU could publish new directives after the vote that could drastically alter the landscape.

Glynn argued that a leave vote would lead to two years of uncertainty for sure as the UK attempted to negotiate deals and that walking away was neither the right decision nor worth the risk.

Turkey

An undecided member asked about the prospect of Turkey joining the EU.

Glynn felt that the leave campaign were conducting a scare campaign around Turkey and that it was unlikely that Turkey would be admitted as a member of the EU in the near future.

Scotland

An audience member asked if unionists were worried by the prospect of Scotland leaving the EU in the event of a Brexit vote.

Lee argued that the SNP, and Nicola Sturgeon, are smart politicians who will call for another referendum when they can get a win. As a third of SNP voters do not want a second referendum he believes the SNP will not call another referendum.

Relationship with EU post-Brexit

An audience member raised the prospect of the EU punishing the UK, as it had in their view punished Greece, in the event that the UK left the EU.

Lee argued that the EU has a stated policy for how they are to treat their neighbours that includes working constructively with them and that the EU has already had a chance to reform, during the negotiations with David Cameron, and has failed to do so. He also pointed out that the EU has a history of taking a long time to negotiate trade agreements.

Anthony Soares, the Deputy Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, pointed out that the EU Neighbourhood Policy referred to by Lee might not be implemented and that, in the case it was, all 27 states would have to agree to the terms proposed.

Glynn argued that messy negotiations were not what the UK should be focusing on but that growing the economy should be the priority.

CAP

An audience member was concerned for the future of the CAP following a Brexit and asked for clarification as to whether those who advocated a vote to leave disliked the subsidy or the regulation elements of the scheme.

Lee pointed out that the UK pays £4.6 billion into the CAP fund and receives £2.9 billion in funding and argued that the UK could set up a similar system and still make savings. He argued that agriculture is an important industry in the rest of the UK, if not as important as it is in Northern Ireland, and argued that the UK government had already guaranteed that a CAP-type policy would be put in place in the event of a Brexit. He also pointed out that the CAP is currently only guaranteed for the next four years and will then need to be renegotiated.

Glyn argued that the agri-food industry in Northern Ireland is in favour of remaining in the EU. In particular he highlighted the Ulster Farmer's Union statement saying that there was no compelling case for Brexit.

3. Polling

Following these questions Bill Wight of LucidTalk presented some interesting analyses of recent Northern Ireland and UK wide polls.

From an online poll of 1,080 respondents in Northern Ireland overall:

54% will vote to remain.

35% will vote to leave.

However, breaking this down demographically provides some interesting insights. The data suggests that Unionists are much more likely to vote to leave:

68% of Unionists will vote to leave.

18% will vote to remain.

Whilst Nationalists and voters for other parties are much more likely to vote to remain"

80% of Nationalists will vote to remain.

11% will vote to leave.

82% of those who voted Alliance, Green, People Before Profit or another party will vote to remain.

10% will vote to leave.

The data also suggests an interesting trend by gender, that 53% of males will vote to leave where 64% of females will vote to remain.

In recent polls of the entire UK results have been close but the most recent polls have showed a slight trend towards a leave vote.