

RECORD OF ISLINGTON IN EUROPE PLENARY

7 September 2016

The meeting was opened by Nick Turton, who welcomed attendees on behalf of Islington In Europe (formerly Islington Stronger In Europe), explained the purpose of the meeting was not to look back and lament over what had happened in June, but discuss what we can and should do now.

He introduced the three key speakers, Hugo Dixon, Sarah Ludford and Richard Watts.

Hugo Dixon, InFacts & Common Ground

Nick introduced Hugo Dixon, now representing Common Ground, as ‘a bit of a hero’ who, as the leading light of InFacts, provided Remain campaigners with an arsenal of useful arguments to use on the doorstep.

Hugo Dixon, addressing the suggested topic of ‘Best Brexit? vs No Brexit?’ came down firmly on the side of No Brexit. Although the Remain campaign has lost one big battle, the referendum, the key aim now must be not to lose future battles and to focus on how to win. The Remain campaign lost the referendum battle because of a lack of vision, making a boring case for the status quo and enabling the Leave campaign to blame all the ills of society on Brussels.



In order to win upcoming battles, we need to reach out to Leave voters and effect a change of mind. We should seek to understand why many voters felt left behind. The aim of Common Ground is to redress this situation and to achieve a fairer society, and a fairer economy, that work for everyone. While at the aggregate level, an economy based on free movement does work, too many people do not feel that they benefit from it. On the other hand, many Leave voters agree on the need to keep Britain open, and on the importance of fighting racism and xenophobia. It may be the case that all racists were Leave voters, but the converse is certainly not true. Another key aim of

Common Ground is to call for an honest political debate. Both sides were guilty of fabrication: the Leave campaign claimed that an additional £350 million would be available to the NHS if we left the EU, and that Turkey would soon be joining. On the other side, David Cameron assured voters that he would remain as prime minister whatever the outcome of the referendum, and it was said that there would be an emergency budget if the country voted to leave. All these claims were proven to be false, but the Leave campaign was guilty of more egregious dishonesty. Common Ground is emphasising the need for a more honest politics, and will be seeking to establish common cause with some of those who voted Leave, with a view to convincing them of the need to stay in Europe.

How can this be achieved? Common Ground is calling for:

- A powerful pro-EU force in the current debate. MPs have ‘run for the hills’ and currently the standard-bearers are various small groups such as Common Ground and Islington In. There is a need for a pro-EU force with a vision for a better Britain in Europe.
- A way of holding Brexiteers to their promises. They should not be allowed to ‘wriggle out’ of these; nor should Theresa May be allowed to do so on their behalf.
- A campaign based on staying in Europe, enabling EU citizens to stay in the UK, and highlighting that migration works for all. Brexit may well destroy the economy, but this should not be allowed to happen unchallenged.
- A referendum on the terms of Brexit. David Davis’ statement in the Commons that it is ‘improbable’ that we will remain in the single market, for which he was rebuked by Number 10, only serves to emphasise that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ has as much meaning as ‘breakfast means breakfast’. Much can evolve in the space of two years.

The message of Common Ground (currently a loose affiliation of about 30 groups), is that we should not give up hope: the previous underdogs won the referendum, but going forward, we can win too.

Sarah Ludford, Lib Dem Europe Spokesperson in the Lords

Proud of being a former councillor in Islington, Baroness Ludford, among others, had ‘enjoyed the farce of David Davis’ statement’, which confirmed that the Brexiteers’ message consisted so far of tedious mantras such as ‘Brexit means Brexit’. In answer to the question ‘Best Brexit vs No Brexit?’, Baroness Ludford placed the Liberal Democrats firmly in the ‘No Brexit’ camp. No Brexit deal could possibly match the scope, richness and density of the web of networks, relationships, standards and laws provided by membership of the EU. The government is currently divided as to whether we should seek to stay in the single market, or whether we should simply seek to achieve as much access as possible, in a trade-off with freedom of movement. This boils down to whether we should be a ‘law-taker’ (as in the ‘Norway model’) or a law-maker. Currently we have elected representatives in the European Parliament, and our ministers speak for us in the European Council. If we leave the EU, we will have no say whatsoever. Indeed, among Brexiteers there is a range of views as to the acceptable scope of EU involvement, with some admitting the wisdom of some EU initiatives. The original name of the EU (the European Community) is eloquent: the EU was, and is, a community, with shared standards and protection of its citizens. The single market is essential to this concept, as are shared concepts of decency and togetherness, which encompass the idea of working together for democracy, human rights, and prosperity.



Baroness Ludford’s view is that taking a stand for ‘No Brexit’ and working for the best possible ‘Brexit deal’ are not mutually exclusive. It would however be a tragedy to spend a decade wasting time, energy and resources on Brexit. Like Hugo Dixon, Baroness Ludford feels that there is a crying need to address the divisions in our society, which are fuelled by frustration, discontent, and alienation. For those who voted to Leave, the EU was generally not the top priority; rather, it became a scapegoat for political, economic and social frustrations. The leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tim Farron, has published the party’s view on their website: since staying in Europe is unequivocally the

best option for the British people, any deal that is negotiated on behalf of the British people should be put to the vote before it is implemented. This is a view that has been expressed by members of other parties, such as Caroline Lucas and Owen Smith. Parliament must remain sovereign: Baroness Ludford expressed outrage at the government’s stance, which boils down to an attempt to get away with driving Brexit forward with the minimum of parliamentary scrutiny. This tactic includes the offer to discuss Brexit in closed sessions in the House of Lords, a procedure which lacks transparency. Baroness Ludford hopes to continue to fight on a number of key issues, including:

- The protection of the rights of EU citizens living in this country and the rights of British citizens living elsewhere in the EU.
- Membership of the single market, with full access to European markets for financial services and a host of other industries. We must continue to play a role in setting the rules
- Maximum cooperation on European standards, on judicial matters and on a range of benefits to citizens, from students’ rights to the European Health Insurance Card and reduced roaming charges

Baroness Ludford concluded by saying that the Liberal Democrats welcome the opportunity to work together with all who share the same ideals, emphasising that the Leavers must not be able to get away with moral blackmail, accusing the Remainers of being bad losers. We have every right to keep campaigning!

Richard Watts, Leader of Islington Council, Labour

Richard Watts expressed pride that 75% of people in Islington voted to Remain, and welcomed the fact that people from all parties and none had come together, reflecting a shared vision of an open, tolerant and inclusive society, both in Islington and in the country as a whole. The EU flag is currently flying at Islington Town Hall in tribute to the majority view of the people of Islington.

For Richard Watts, the vote for Brexit nationally is a disaster. Like the previous speakers, Richard Watts is of the view that answering the question of why the Remain campaign lost can inform the ongoing battle to remain in the EU. Essentially, many Leave voters saw the referendum as a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the political establishment. Feelings of insecurity and discontent about housing or low-waged jobs were channelled through the prism of the EU debate. The Leave campaign held out the prospect of ‘a better world out there’, without going into any specifics. For the In campaign to gain traction now among people who feel excluded and marginalised (and local campaigners did see evidence that social class was a factor in how people voted), it is crucial to persuade them that remaining in the EU will be better for them and for their families. The campaign to Remain clearly failed to be persuasive enough before the referendum, and indeed anti-European sentiment had a head start in building up a head of steam. The anti-European case has been built aggressively since Mrs. Thatcher’s Bruges speech in 1988, whereas, despite the efforts of groups such as Britain in Europe and the European Movement, there has been no single pro-European movement which has galvanized opinion in the same way. We need to do this now, to seize the



opportunity to counter the anti-European echo-chamber in much of the national press, which has had the effect of normalising sentiments that seemed extreme 20 or 30 years ago. The other side has a head start but we should not give up; while accepting the result of the referendum, we should focus on the way forward and on ensuring that, for example, passporting rights, so important for companies based in London, do not fall victim to a ‘hard’ Brexit. In Islington, nearly one fifth of the population of the borough are citizens of other EU countries. We must not allow their future and those of their families to be clouded by uncertainty.

Given one certainty, that the Leave campaign will not be able to fulfil its promises, Richard Watts called for the British people to be given a say on the terms of Brexit. People need to be given the choice of deciding whether they were ‘sold a pup’, but this will only happen if we work together to make the case. Even if it is 30 years too late, we should start now!

Summary of groups and campaigns

Freddie Wilkinson of March for Europe and Phillip Kerle of Britain for Europe then gave an overview of the other groups and campaigns currently fighting the pro-EU cause.

- The focus of **Britain for Europe** is currently on three issues: resisting the triggering of Article 50, failing which, minimising the damage to the economy and to the UK as a whole, and re-engaging with the EU. Britain for Europe seeks to reach outside London and acts as an umbrella organisation for groups in about 30 cities. The group has launched a ‘Love a Leaver’ campaign, seeking to persuade Leavers to change their mind.
- **March for Europe** has organised successful demonstrations in several cities, most recently on Saturday 3 September, and acts as a facilitating organisation whose aims are deliberately vague. It seeks to reach out to those who feel the need to come together after the referendum result and works with a variety of groups, including Common Ground and Britain for Europe.
- **The European Movement** has long promoted close ties between the UK and Europe. It is currently calling for a second referendum on the terms of Brexit.
- **Open Britain** (formerly the Stronger In campaign) is now focusing on remaining in the single market and on holding the Leave campaign to account.
- **Leave Watch** (fronted by Chuka Umunna) is also focusing on the broken promises of the Leave campaign.
- The **Pro-European London Forum** is another umbrella body whose focus is on convening groups across London.
- Other groups such as **48%** are mainly present on social media, and indeed all of the above groups have websites and are active on Facebook and Twitter.

Plenary discussion

The debate was then opened to the floor and a lively discussion ensued, mediated by Luisa Fulci.

To the question of what Remainers should now be aiming for, a range of views was expressed, ranging from fighting tooth and nail to prevent Brexit, on the grounds that Brexiteers' views on trade are so incompatible that they will implode, to a more tactical approach which would seek to win over a majority of either free marketeers or protectionist 'little Englanders', and persuade them that a vote to stay in the EU is the best option.

One speaker added a note of caution about adopting too much of a tactical approach, for fear of being accused of hypocrisy; rather, we should be upfront and try to generate hope, to counter the feelings of despair and resignation felt by many Remainers in the aftermath of the referendum.

Another speaker emphasised the need to be positive and to take up the mantle of patriotism by speaking up for staying in the EU, in contrast to leaving the field to bogus nationalists in the Leave camp.

There is some hope that the government's intention to use the royal prerogative to start the Article 50 procedure will be struck down by the courts in October.



In any event, another speaker made the point that we must continue to send the message to Parliament that parliamentary sovereignty must be respected. We need a coherent voice in parliament: a large majority of MPs did not vote for Brexit and we need to energise them and give at least some of them the courage to stand up and be heard (to the possible detriment of their career).

A common theme in the discussion was the need for a coordinated approach. One speaker expressed dismay that there were so many different groups; another had hoped that the way forward would be clearer.

The point that we need to reach out to people who feel left behind and marginalised was reiterated with feeling, although it was also pointed out that many leave voters could not be described as impoverished and marginalised. Locally, however, it was pointed out that we do need to reach out more to people who felt that the Remain message had not been explained to them clearly, or was not relevant to them. We need to engage with all sections of the community, and indeed one speaker pointed out that minds had been changed by taking the time to engage with voters on the doorstep. This is what is needed going forward.

One speaker suggested that we also need a simple slogan along the lines of the leave campaign's 'Take back control!', which the Remain campaign lacked during the campaign.

Close

Nick Turton thanked both the keynote speakers and those who had participated in the discussion. The way forward is still not clear but certain themes had emerged in the discussion that Islington In Europe would act upon:

- The need for coordination. The campaign needs to coalesce and to speak with a single voice.
- The need to reach out to Leave voters and convince them that Brexit is not in their interests.
- The need for MPs to understand the concerns of almost half of the electorate who voted to remain.
- The need for a voice or voices to make a noise about this in Parliament.
- The need to keep campaigning!