

AEJ COLLOQUIUM 'FUTURE OF UK-EU RELATIONS BEYOND BREXIT'

PANEL TWO: 'Whose Europe is it anyway? Media and Public opinion'

Dr Imke Henkel - Summary of presentation

The majority vote on the referendum for Brexit must be seen in the context of the long-running diet of what the European Commission dubbed "Euromyths" -- fake or hyped-up stories about bendy bananas or standardized condom sizes -- in the popular British press. These stories conveyed the popular myths of the witty, feisty Brit standing up to the European bullies.

Trivial as these stories were, they came to dominate the perception of the EU for a population who was largely disinterested in the institutional and political details of European politics. Tellingly, the false stories prevailed, even though they have been debunked plenty of times, not only by the European Commission but also in the mainstream press, such as the *Guardian* or the *FT*, but even the Eurosceptic *Telegraph*. The false stories prevailed -- and eventually reappeared in the pro-Brexit-campaign -- because they chimed with the popular myth of British sovereignty and Britain being the outlier, the 'special one'.

At the same time, ironically, the UK stands out among the countries of Europe for having the best think-tanks on European politics -- just think of shining examples such as the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) or the Centre for European Reform (CER) -- and a rare capacity for forward-looking policy ideas.

It is no accident that the present Conservative government has made a devastating mess of the Brexit negotiations. The deeper reason is that the party as it is now has no intellectually coherent concept of where it wants to take the country, but is despite torn between extreme versions of a neoliberal capitalism, as put forward by the likes of Jacob Rees-Mogg and his "European Research Group", and an equally incoherent tax-and-spend policy which promises to fund the NHS with non-existent Brexit-benefits while in fact raising taxes to do so.

However, precisely because Britain undergoes such a profound crisis there is a new energy to "remake Britain's politics", as *The Economist* put it on its cover on 29th September. The Brexit vote was not only a moment of shock and trauma for many people, but also, in its wake, triggered a sense of euphoria that the country can, indeed, develop new political ideas which put equality and a renewed liberalism at its centre. Therefore, out of the current panic, Britain might yet show itself to be a source of positive ideas on big political issues like social inequality. If so, the UK might actually develop ideas to assist the whole of Europe to overcome the genuine crises it now faces.