

AEJ UK 50-Years Forum: Colloquium on the Future of UK-EU Relations beyond Brexit

William Horsley: Opening Remarks

Hello and welcome to this forward-looking, open-minded debate on “The future of UK-European Union relations beyond Brexit”. I’m William Horsley, the chairman of the UK Section of the Association of European Journalists. Thank you all coming help us celebrate our “birthday”.

It is just 50 years since our far-sighted journalist ancestors - some of whom I stress are still very much alive! – founded a section here. Today the AEJ is a Europe-wide, independent professional journalists association. And we in the UK Section have organised this timely event, just six months before the scheduled date of the UK’s departure from the EU -- with the generous support of the European Commission.

I am especially happy to be joined by more than a dozen of my AEJ journalist colleagues from all over the EU – from Finland to Bulgaria, from Spain to Lithuania. The Commission has helped to make their presence possible. And we will hear from some of them very soon.

Another word about the life of the Association of European Journalists in London: in this country, in normal times anyway, it is notoriously hard to maintain the close attention of the public and the media on things European, compared with a more instinctive interest in things that happen in the USA and some other regions of the globe where the UK has historic ties. Yet our bread and butter activity, as journalists with a shared interest in European matters, is to hold regular professional meetings with newsmakers and public figures of many nationalities focussing on all aspects of European and international affairs. Our past meetings have given our members – and other journalists who are also welcome to sign up to attend our events – many early insights into the jagged course of Britain’s political relationship with the EU. Our website carries full written accounts of those meetings for those who may be interested to read them.

Among the memorable moments were in early 2016, when we were able to grill the senior German politician David McAllister – Angela Merkel’s point-man for contacts with the UK in the run-up to the referendum – about what sort of concessions David Cameron could hope to extract from the EU side to help him win the vote, as he intended, for the UK to remain in the EU on a more settled basis than before. In particular he was after an emergency brake on immigration. What we heard from Chancellor Merkel’s envoy showed that little or no flexibility could be expected from Germany. That realisation foreshadowed the referendum vote a few months later.

Earlier this year we heard from John Kerr, now Lord Kerr, the “author Article 50” under which the UK is preparing to leave the EU. He shared with us his multiple and harsh criticisms of the UK government’s approach to the Brexit negotiations. But he also made plain, from his vantage-point as the author of the actual language of the treaty, that the EU side had also been distinctly unhelpful in one crucial way. They had insisted on imposing a strict ‘sequencing’ of the talks, so denying the UK’s demand that the withdrawal agreement should be negotiated at the same time and in the context of the “framework for future relations”.

And most recently, earlier this month, Lord Peter Lilley, an outspoken Brexiteer and former UK cabinet minister responsible for international trade, presented us with a controversial but hard-headed argument in favour of Brexit addressing the fundamentals. He told us that he foresaw a bright future for the UK by breaking free of the EU’s single market rules, and trading with the whole world on WTO terms. That option has been called disastrous by leading business organisations, and others too. But Peter Lilley’s argument goes to the heart of the nature of the European Union as a legal, treaty-based entity with a uniquely complex set of laws and regulations, which is indeed challenged as never before by the prospect of the UK leaving.

In fact, David Cameron was only the most recent of a long series of British prime ministers who have sought to achieve a looser set of rules for this country, and what Mr Cameron called a 'more comfortable' relationship with Europe in the minds of British people as a whole. This Colloquium is designed as an opportunity to broaden the Brexit debate beyond the world only of politicians, and to hear from a range of voices of people from many walks of life who take various positions for personal and professional reasons on Brexit itself, and on how the UK and the EU could construct a healthy and mutually beneficial relationship between the UK and an EU 'beyond Brexit'.

A quick word about this afternoon's programme: Originally it had been arranged that the UK's European Commissioner, Julian King, would be here to give us his live update on the prospects for the future relationship – including in his special area of responsibility, security. But Mr King has been obliged instead to travel to America this week. He sent his deep regrets. In his place, though, as keynote speaker I am very happy to welcome Sir Martin Donnelly, who until only last year worked in commanding heights of the UK civil service. He has unrivalled first-hand knowledge of the machinery of the UK government, and insights into the workings of Brussels too. He has agreed to speak on the theme of 'The UK and the EU: Still close partners beyond Brexit question mark?'

We hope that all or most of you stay with us all way to the 'reward' of drinks at 6 pm. We have a rich agenda with two panels with outstanding speakers coming up – one on "Politics, identity and cultures" to discuss what underlies Britain's ambiguous relationship, down the decades, in dealings with the rest of the EU. The second Panel will be on the role of the media and media cultures of the UK and continental Europe in shaping the roller coaster swings in public opinion – the Factor X which has bucked established political parties and governments in many parts Europe, not just here.

We want many of you to join in the dialogue. Because we are setting out today to achieve something quite rare in the current fevered climate of much rage and apparent deadlock. We aim to enable, with your help, a reasoned, open, and listening dialogue about how that healthy and mutually beneficial framework for future relations might be achieved, and what it should be made up of.