

GERMINAL

INTERNATIONAL BRANCH OF THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY

MARCH 2017

A crucial year



brusselslabour.eu

Stay and Fight



Keir Starmer MP Shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the EU and Jenny Chapman MP Shadow Minister for Exiting the EU with Brussels Labour Chair Jo Wood, an Committee Member Keir Fitch

Brussels Labour was pleased to welcome Sir Keir Starmer MP to its Branch meeting on 1 March, at a critical time during the parliamentary passage of the Article 50 Bill. At the outset, Keir Starmer acknowledged the distressing situation for pro-European Labour party members. "I am the 48%", he said, indicating his own personal sense of loss at the referendum result, particularly for his children and future generations.

He described the ongoing process in Parliament, and in particular the amendments (at the time) under debate in the House of Lords on the protection of EU nationals and the parliamentary vote on the final deal negotiated with the EU.

Although a difficult process for the Labour Party, Keir Starmer was clear that having accepted the referendum and the terms under which it was conducted, as democrats, it was essential to accept the result. For this reason, Labour would be voting in favour of the Article 50 Bill to give the Prime Minister the authority to begin exit negotiations with the EU. As for the negotiations themselves, he expects a three-stage process involving an exit agreement, transitional arrangements and a final UK-EU Treaty. Labour will fight for the final deal to be based on the principles of internationalism and cooperation, which are at the heart of our movement.

He also warned about the fight ahead against the ultimate ideological goal of the Brexiteers, of a low-tax deregulated UK. The fight to retain environmental and employment rights, and the social model would be a key priority in the years ahead.

There followed a wide-ranging question and answer session with Brussels Labour members, touching on issues including the Party's approach to Brexit and the Article 50 process, acquired rights for EU nationals, the 15-year rule on expat voting rights and ongoing security cooperation in Europe.

His message to our members was clear: to stay and fight for the values and principles which led us to campaign for a remain vote in the first place: solidarity, collaboration, cooperation and internationalism. We have a duty to stay and fight for the soul of our Party and country, and to ensure that those values and principles endure in the future relationship between the UK and EU.

We thank Keir very much for taking the time to come and talk to our members, and look forward to continuing the dialogue as the Article 50 process unfolds.

Isobel Findlay

The Long Haul



Giampi and fellow members of the Labour Movement for Europe

The Labour Movement for Europe held its AGM Conference on 25th February in London. It was a well attended meeting with a stellar line up of speakers. Contributing to the event's success was the financial support of the Party of European Socialists and the fabulous International Transport Workers Federation conference venue.

It has been a difficult time for us pro-Europeans in the Labour Party, but what emerged from the LME/PES Conference was a strong agreement that we must oppose the Hard Brexit that Theresa May is proposing, and pick our battles with care so as to maximise our effectiveness. Time is on our side. Young people voted overwhelming to Remain, but the truth is that over the last few decades, we gradually lost the hearts and minds of much of the electorate. But a change of heart will not happen by itself. We must stop mourning and start organising one more time.

The United Kingdom's place is in the EU, but we will not win our argument unless there is a significant change in public opinion. Key to our argument must be that Yes Europe is about jobs, peace, the environment and security, but it is also about culture, food, fashion and fun, and above all it is about our children's and grandchildren's future.

In the immediate short term, we must fight against the Tories' Hard Brexit; from their withdrawal from

the Single Market, to the continental co-operation that is so imperative to our health services, our universities and research capabilities as well as our security. Theresa May is aiming for a Brexit that is damaging to our economy, and that threatens the future of young people in this country. They believe that outside of the Single Market and the Customs Union, they will be able to negotiate a gold standard FTA agreement with the EU. My WTO experience tells me that this is pie in the sky.

We keep being told that we cannot thwart the will of the people, but the people did not vote for a Brexit at all costs. The Brexiteers' campaign was based on lies and fear, so our job is to keep reminding them and the public at every opportunity. And opportunities will arise. Plenty of them.

We are now planning events across the country. Neil Kinnock and Jan Royall will be bringing together a new LME Parliamentary Group with representatives from the Lords, Commons and the European Parliament and Spencer Livermore will be heading an LME Communications Group to sharpen our message.

We are in it for the long haul and we will be at the forefront of campaigning both in the short term against Hard Brexit, and in the long term to win the public argument and hearts and minds.

Giampi Alhadeff, LME National Chair

Time to Devolve England



Coventry skyline

Sion Simon is Labour MEP for the West Midlands and also Labour candidate for West Midlands mayor. He has launched his campaign to win the elections on 4 May and he was able to find time in his busy schedule to come to Brussels Labour and talk about his vision for renewing local government.

Regional devolution has been long overdue. The previous Labour government took bold steps to devolve the UK along national lines but regional devolution in England was not a priority. As a result, the UK remains the most centralised country in the industrialised world.

Only 19% of public spending is determined at regional level in the UK, compared to 50% in Germany. Most UK cities have a GDP per capita under the national average. Cities are centres of decay and inequality. Brexit makes reform all the more important because of the economic uncertainty and the need to attract investment.

A regional devolution process has been launched by the government, but it is quite gradual. Whereas the 1999 national devolution package established a complete framework with clear division of powers, the current process is open ended and starts with a bidding phase this May.

What powers and budget will the new Mayors have? This is as yet undefined because the first question is what do we need to do? We need to develop a vision about where do we need to get to in eleven years from now. Then we infer what powers should be devolved as a function of those goals. The first term of the new Mayors will be essentially spent on consultations but by the second term we should have a defined set of policies, in particular as regards housing; development planning; transport; health and social care.

As regards budgets, Sion Simon argued that the Barnett formula allocates substantial per capita grants to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. But Birmingham has a lot higher unemployment and lower living standards so there is no quantitative argument to spend less on the West Midlands region.

However, the election challenge in 2017 will be to raise awareness in the electorate because the regional devolution process is unknown. The real test will be in 2020. However there is a need to deliver real change in the meantime. Areas where it should be possible to make a difference in the short term include transport ticketing; lowering rents on private housing; improving mental health care.

In the discussion that followed Sion clarified his position that whilst this government's approach is

insufficient, nonetheless he believed that it was an opportunity that had to be seized. Chancellor Osborne had realized that the regional economic imbalances were too great and that the South East was buckling. The new devolution had many flaws but was still an opportunity "to run our place".

This devolution is based around the main conurbations and the West Midlands electorate comprises 2 million voters.

The new framework has a lot in common with the County Councils which were established in the 1970s and then abolished by Thatcher. In effect the Tories took away our manufacturing base and then took away our means to build it back.

Sion believed that England did have regional identities e.g. the Northeast but we didn't have a tradition of regional government or a language to express our regional identities. The West Midlands

has an identity linked to manufacturing, from steam engines and spitfires to electric cars. It is a creative engineering identity. A big part of the job of Mayor will be to articulate that identity, make it real and create a sense of pride.

He concluded by saying that the HS2 high speed rail link will be good for the West Midlands. The project itself will create jobs and in the longer term a 4% spike in growth is expected from the rail link to London. But Mayors will not have any say in the project, all power is in the hands of the HS2 company. There has not been enough local consultation and there is a risk of highly congested roads for decade to come during the building works as the local train service will be disrupted.

Martin Dawson

New Approaches Needed



There've been a lot of songs written about Friday night, but I can't think of any about going to political meetings, (although there have been some great political songs). But I found myself on a Friday night in February dodging the rain on the way to the PS building building to the Sister Party meeting "Super Election Year 2017: Crucial for a progressive EU?".

However, with socialist party speakers from Belgium, The Czech Republic, The Netherlands, France and Germany, discussing the rise of the far right the meeting was never going to be dull. A clear theme was the politics of identity, with several of the speakers identifying anxiety over identity as a key factor for people turning to the right – more so than the economy or unemployment.

Marit Maij (MP PvdA, The Netherlands), spoke about how this insecurity was milked by far right groups, to create fear of migrants - even those from second or third generation families- who were not seen as 100% Dutch.

Different approaches to challenging the Right were discussed, ranging from ignoring the far right and trying to deny them space by not talking about or responding to them, to counteracting and contradicting their negative messages by strong messages from the left. The right thrive on the politics of fear and making people 'other', so one way to confront them is to have a strong message about inclusiveness, about being 'good neighbours' and about having a European identity built on support. Alexander Schweiter (SPD Germany), highlighted the

benefits of strong leadership: someone able to develop a strong and convincing counter narrative.

Laura Silmani (Chair, Young European Socialists, P.S. France), argued strongly that what the left stand for is critical to counteract the extremists of the right: that new progressive policies need to be put in place, such as a universal income and measures to support environmental protection, that while workers rights are important that progressive policies must in addition respond to the aspirations of young people and concerns of quality of life.

Jan Cornillie (Director of Policy Sp.a), talked about breaking down the barriers in communities, and that one of the successes of the right had been to create a correlation in people's minds between terrorism, refugees and Islam, and that it was essential that the left act to counteract this. That the debate for individuals has moved away from 'who will I vote for' to 'can I change something with my vote' and that those that have held power in the last decade are being held responsible for people's growing sense of insecurity. And that what we should be arguing for is a system that isn't protecting people on the basis of nationality and ethnicity. That society should move away from market fundamentalism, towards an alternative vision, where those that play by the rules are valued and respected.

In a step towards breaking down barriers on our own doorstep, the socialist parties in Brussels are moving towards a single list system for local elections. They are also starting a shared campaign 'I vote where I live', to argue for all European citizens living in

Brussels to be able to vote in Regional as well as local elections.

In an innovative step the Belgian P.S. has also developed a 'Chantier des idées' to encourage new ideas and foster exchanges of views and experiences. There is also a need to address people's concerns about participation in society and a sense of alienation – that the establishment works outside of the people, rather than for the people.

These weren't the only issues that crossed the table, and sadly there was very little time for questions. It was a shame that there was no one from the UK at

the top table, as lessons could be drawn from the recent referendum – or maybe it would have just dominated the debate. I am not sure. However, it was an interesting session and I would give up another wet Friday night for more such discussions. Apologies to anyone in advance I have misquoted them, or failed to quote them – just put it down to that TGIF feeling.

Sue Davies

NOTICEBOARD

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Provisional dates for Branch meetings in 2017

Wednesday 26 April

Wednesday 31 May

Wednesday 28 June

SUBS 2017

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To confirm your membership of Brussels Labour as well as to the Labour Party, you need to pay a small additional subscription. Unlike constituency Labour parties in the UK, Brussels Labour is entirely self-funding so to help support our activities members are asked to pay an annual fee of 25 euro (waged) 5 euro (unwaged/stagiaires).

It is easy to forget if you have paid, or perhaps time has passed so quickly that it was last year – or even the year before – that you last paid.

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