Speech by Stephen Kinnock on Think Tank Europa's Brexit-conference 8th of October 2018

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Thank you all very much, and thank you X for that very kind introduction.

It's truly an honour and a great privilege for me to be here to speak to you all this evening. As you know, Denmark has such a special place in my heart.

Not only because my wife, Helle, happened to be this country's first female prime minister, but because this city embodies the very best of Europe: it's a melting pot of ideas and cultures, of vibrant communities and nexus of community cohesion making it a remarkable place to work and enjoy life.

And of course Europa represents the very best from our European family: fresh thinking, cohesion and cooperation which provide it as a great platform for influence and change, here in Denmark and all across Europe.

Yet the sad reality is that I am here to talk about something that destabilises this continent-wide tradition of working together and building partnerships.

I speak of course, of Brexit. Or the B-word, as we call it!

Now many of you be wondering – how on earth did the UK get to this absurd position? What a mess. And you're not alone.

So let me first try to unpick that question.

The Brexit vote

There can be no doubt that Britain is more polarised than we have been at any time since the Second World War. Young versus old, city versus town, graduate versus non-graduate – these are the fault lines upon which our nation precariously stands.

And these fault lines have created what I call a Values Chasm.

On one side of the Values Chasm we have the Cosmopolitan tribe – typically university educated, urban, highly mobile and confident in the modern, globalised world.

And on the other we have the Communitarians – often non-graduates who value familiarity, security and community, and have experienced the profound economic, social and cultural changes of the last 40 years as loss.

Whilst the EU referendum did not create these two tribes, it certainly sharpened and deepened the chasm that lies between them.

Those who voted Leave come predominantly from the second group – the Communitarians.

-   these are typically families and communities who have bitter experience of the damage that the whirlwind of

globalisation has inflicted on their communities and high streets;

- have lost all sense of control over their destiny;

- and who ae less likely to have the skills or connections to cope with the relentless churn of the twenty-first century labour market.

There is nothing new in any of this, of course - the plight of Communitarian communities has been plain to see for decades.

I am the MP for Aberavon in South Wales, home to the Port Talbot steel works. The people of Port Talbot therefore know better than most about the importance of trade in industrial goods with the EU; but they still voted 60 / 40 for Brexit.

And I'll tell you why:

Because for decades they have watched the heart being ripped out of our manufacturing industries, and with it the

fabric and identities of the towns and communities that have grown up around those industries;

Because whenever they asked why so little was being done to protect all those high-skill, high-wage jobs that were being exported to low-wage labour markets they were told that nothing could be done because globalisation is an unstoppable force of nature;

And because whenever they raised concerns about the impact of immigration on their communities they were told that they were bigots, or racists.

And let's be clear: these are proud, resilient people. They are not looking for special treatment, or for anyone's charity. What they are looking for is a level playing field - an opportunity to compete without having one hand tied behind their backs.

But they rightly wondered why successive governments stood by and allowed this to happen.

Now, I know what you're thinking: the failures of the last thirty years have had nothing to do with the European Union - the UK's economic model was not broken by Brussels, it was broken by Westminster.

And you would be absolutely right.

But having been largely ignored by mainstream politicians for so long, and in the absence of a compelling alternative political vision, millions of British voters saw the 2016 referendum as an unmissable opportunity to vent their anger and frustration against the establishment.

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So, the vote for Brexit was in large part a Communitarian backlash against a Britain run entirely for Cosmopolitans.

But a significant proportion also voted Leave because of deep-seated reservations about the European project.

For these Leave voters the ever-closer nature of the European Union appeared to epitomise a world without borders – a world that they'd never voted for.

Rather than looking at the European project as an opportunity to look to the future, steeped in national pride… they have always seen it as a symbol of our country's fall from grace, and from greatness.

It came to a head in 2004 when Tony Blair decided that the UK should be the only EU member state to accept free movement of people from the Accession Eight without a transition period.

And the rest, as they say, is history...

The 2004 decision on free movement probably did more than anything else in terms of stoking anti-EU sentiment, supported of course by a tabloid media which knows all too well that hate and division sell papers.

Meanwhile our politicians have always been happy to take all the credit when things go right, whilst blaming everything on Europe when things go wrong.

And then you just have to throw the Eurozone and refugee crises into this toxic mix, and I often conclude that it is actually pretty amazing that 48% voted Remain...!!

When you stand back and look at this picture you see clearly why the phrase 'take back control' resonated so profoundly with the British people.

And how pro-Europeans should respond

So how should Europeans respond?

I am passionately pro-European, but I believe that the first response of every single person in this room, and indeed of pro-Europeans across the length and breadth of this country, must be to ask the hard questions, and to think deeply and honestly about the underlying reasons for the Leave vote.

Yes, appalling lies were told by the Leave campaign, and yes they cheated.

But we cannot, we must not, allow our anger and frustration about the Brexit vote cloud our judgement about its underlying causes.

Because the 2016 referendum was a re-set moment, and it was a wake up call.

We can either choose to accept that the European project has at times been guilty of over-reach and hubris, and that reform is essential, or we can choose to believe that it should just plough on regardless.

We can either choose to believe that those who voted Leave in 2016 didn't actually know what they were voting for, or we can choose to understand that in fact millions of them knew precisely what they were doing, and why.

We can either choose to engage with Brexit by pushing for a practical, bridge-building deal with the EU, or we can seek to reverse it.

Because that, in essence, is the choice with which we pro-Europeans are now confronted: do we believe that Brexit should be softened, or do we believe that it should be reversed?

Well, I am firmly in the softening camp.

For the best part of two years now I have been arguing that we must seek a Brexit that must meet two crucial tests: first, it must help to re-unite our deeply divided country, and second it must do the least possible harm economically.

And the only way of leaving the EU that meets those two tests is the European Economic Area.

An EEA-based Brexit is the only viable option, for the following reasons:

• First, by becoming a non-EU member of the EEA, alongside Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein, the UK would be leaving the political framework of the EU whilst remaining in the economic one.

On the doorstep in my constituency I constantly hear people say that they voted to join the Common Market in 1973 but then somewhere along the way Europe became something different, for which they had never supported. An EEA-based Brexit would, in my view, deliver the re-set that my constituents are looking for.

• Second, an EEA-based Brexit would also enable us to address the concerns about free movement of Labour that drove so many to vote Leave, as articles 112 and 113 of the EEA Agreement enable the unilateral suspension and reform of any one of the four freedoms.

Immigration has provided huge benefits to our country, but in order to truly cherish something, then you must also be prepared to change it.

• Third, the EEA is based on a well-established set of political and legal institutions, and the EEA countries also have automatic associate status on almost all of the EU agencies. The UK would therefore have a ready-made seat at the table when EU policies and legislation are being shaped.

• Fourth, and perhaps the most compelling argument of all, given the utterly shambolic and incompetent manner in which this government is conducting the negotiations, is that the EEA actually exists. It was created in 1993, and it is a model that governments and businesses throughout the EU have come to understand and appreciate.

With the risk of a no-deal Brexit now looming larger than ever, it is time to get real.

The negotiators are still grappling with the issue of Irish border backstop, and that as long as this is the case the entire process will continue to falter.

Theresa May's Chequers proposal is completely unworkable. The two main planks – the so-called Facilitated Customs

Arrangement and the Common Rule Book for Goods but not Services – are not only flawed politically but simply don't make sense logically.

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So with all this in mind, it is time that both the government and the leadership and front bench of my own Party face up to reality.

An EEA-based Brexit would command cross-party support in Parliament that would roundly defeat the Chequers-lite fudge that Theresa May seems likely to ask parliament to approve later this autumn.

And, even more importantly, cross-party backing for an EEA-based Brexit would also comprehensively see off the no-deal scenario that the Tory Brextremists are so keen to provoke.

An EEA-based Brexit would therefore reflect the aspirations and concerns of large swathes of both the 52 and the 48, lay the foundations for a new settlement with the EU, and

ultimately shape a consensus around which to re-unite a deeply divided Britain.

In my mind an EEA-based Brexit is a far more desirable path forward than a Second Referendum – or a so-called People's Vote.

Support for this option is growing, for perfectly understandable reasons, and if Theresa May's proposals fail it may just come to this.

But we need to recognise that another referendum would be extremely divisive. What would it say for democracy if we decide to go back to the voters and ask for a different answer?

It would also be a gift to the populists and the nationalists. Nigel Farage would once again ride into town on his red, white and blue horse, with Rees-Mogg not far behind in his Bentley, accusing the 'Westminster elite' of attempting to subvert the will of the people.

The anger and aggression that they would unleash would make the 2016 referendum look like a walk in the park, and their narrative would attract huge support, as it chimes with the anti-parliamentary spirit of the age.

So it's not too late for the Labour Party to change tack by starting to advocate an EEA-based Brexit, as the only viable way in which we can accept and respect the referendum result without wrecking the jobs, livelihoods and communities of the very people we were elected to represent.

And it's the only option we have, if we are to set about healing the wounds, breaking the impasse, and re-uniting our deeply divided country.

What next?

So, what do I think will actually happen next?

Well, the last few years have taught us that making forecasts about politics is a mug's game. But if you were to hold a gun to my head and ask me to make a prediction about the next few months I would say that the EU and the UK probably will conclude some sort of deal, in all probability at an emergency summit in November.

In Parliament the kamikaze Brextremists will certainly vote against it – meaning the PM's aim will be to have a deal that is vague and nebulous enough to secure around 280 of her 316 MPs – plus the DUP – plus 30 - 40 Labour MPs, to get her over the line.

Whilst walking through the division lobby with the likes of Jacob Rees-Mogg is not a prospect that I savour, I am not prepared to vote for a leap of faith that is utterly lacking in detail about the terms of our future relationship with the EU.

I will not vote for a blind Brexit.

The only form of Brexit that I would be prepared to vote for is an EEA-based Brexit, and I will be making that crystal clear to the government whips.

However, there are dozens of my colleagues representing Leave-voting constituencies who may come to the view that they must not in any way be seen to be blocking Brexit.

And this, I am afraid, is where my crystal ball clouds over. Party discipline is not what it was. The Conservatives' psycho-drama over Europe continues to tear them apart, and Labour is led by a man who defied the whip 550 times during his career on the back benches.

And that makes it impossible to say with any degree of certainty how the meaningful vote on the deal will pan out.

Conclusion

I wanted to conclude with a word about how the EU should respond to Brexit. Not in terms of the short-term tactics of

the negotiations, but rather in terms of what Brexit means for the long-term future of the Union.

I have already said that Brexit must be seen as a re-set moment for the UK.

But it is equally vital that it be seen as a wake-up call for Europe.

For too long the EU has attempted to apply a one-size-fits-all approach that has failed to take account of the diverse array of national histories, economies and cultures that are the building blocks of our great continent.

Brexit can and must trigger a re-think. Serious strategic effort should now be put into creating an outer ring of countries with no interest in a single currency or a shared fiscal space, but who are looking for EEA-style membership of the Single Market.

And the EU must also conduct an in-depth review of the free movement of labour. The indivisibility of the four freedoms

has become a mantra that is supposed to hold Europe together, but the fact is that it is having the opposite effect.

President Macron has spoken positively about the development of a multi-speed Europe, so let's hope that his rhetoric can be turned into reality.

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So, Brexit must trigger a new, clear-sighted realism about the future of Europe.

But we must never forget that Europe is also an idea, and a source of inspiration. We must make our case for Europe with passion, and conviction.

Because the need for the European ideal has never been greater.

Everywhere we look, right and left-wing populism and extremism are on the march;

An ever-more aggressive and belligerent Russia looms large on our eastern borders;

A booming but increasingly authoritarian China is building its global reach;

And a deeply unstable and unreliable President sits in the White House.

In his book 'On Tyranny - Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century', Timothy Snyder writes:

'Until recently we had convinced ourselves that there was nothing in the future but more of the same. We allowed ourselves to accept the politics of inevitability, the sense that history could move in only one direction: toward liberal democracy. In doing so we lowered our defences, constrained our imagination, and opened the way for precisely the kinds of regimes we'd told ourselves could never return.'

Well, it's time for us all to get our defences back up, and to unleash the potential of our collective imagination, once again.

It's time for us to re-discover that the strength at the heart of Europe has always been its resilience.

The ability to absorb the shock and to bounce back;
To rise to the challenge;

And to mobilise that powerful combination of realism and idealism that has served it so well for decades.

Thank you.