

Michael Heseltine's Speech to European Movement UK

It is my privilege to accept your Presidency. I shall not detain you long. At my age my principle role is to find my successor!

Throughout history nationalism and racism have been used to whip up people's passions to emotional boiling point. Too easily they tip the balance from argument to bloodshed.

Who today can name England's seven Kingdoms? Who can remember that they were ultimately united at the edge of the sword by King Aethelstan a thousand years ago? Wales was to follow, then Scotland and Ireland to form the United Kingdom.

At every twist and turn many fought and died.

Yorkshiremen and Lancastrians fought the Wars of the Roses hundreds of years later. If we weren't fighting each other there were plenty of real foreigners to fight. Italians, at the time called Romans, French, Spanish, Dutch and then most recently the Germans.

Across Europe the horror of repeated slaughter unleashed a demand that it must never happen again. The European Movement was born. In Churchill's phrase jaw jaw not war war.

As a teenager I listened to that chorus.

As an undergraduate I joined my party to support it.

As a parliamentary candidate I argued for it.

We have enjoyed an unprecedented period of peace in Europe. We have created a Europe of parliamentary democracies. We have shared sovereignty because it is in our individual national interest so to do. We have enjoyed living standards historically unprecedented.

The Brexit case is a slickly packaged manifesto targeted at those most dangerous of human emotions. Nationalism and racialism. It is articulated with skilfully woven images of foreigners, immigrants and bureaucrats.

Its critics are dismissed contemptuously as out of touch elites.

The speeches are easy, the priorities simple. The reality is very different.

That is the case repeated and reported with ever louder articulation designed to drown out the critical question. Any enquiry about the detail is swept aside in a ramble of evasive generalisation.

You have heard them all. Too many immigrants. A new world for industry and commerce free of Brussels red tape. A United Kingdom astride the world. Let us look below the surface.

Start with immigration, a word that has so often dripped from the lips of Nigel Farage. Ask the question: why has the British government done so little to exercise its sovereign power to control non European immigration?

Control is completely within our power. Europe has no locus, no interest in forcing us to take immigrants from India and the Caribbean – or indeed American and Australia.

The answer is, of course, that we need them.

Our public services depend on immigrants. Visit a doctor's surgery, a hospital, a University, an old peoples' home, our wealth making companies and start counting. Today most immigrants come from outside the European Union. We are grateful for the immense contribution they make to our country.

A new world for our companies.

My adult life has been sustained not only by the high octane excitement of public life but by the stimulation of the private enterprise world.

I know something of its thrills and spills. You win some, you lose some. Hopefully the balance is on the right side. What turns investors into gamblers is uncertainty. Brexit has overshadowed the workplaces of our country with impenetrable clouds. What serious decision can rational men and women take when faced now with a political crisis to which there is no end in sight. For the small business people and the self employed it is their savings, their livelihood that is at stake. For managers and directors they are the trustees of their company's fortunes in which are invested the nation's savings.

They want and are entitled to answers that sweep away those clouds. Until they get them they will sit on their hands, delay decisions, adopt survival strategies. The enterprise culture has Brexit round its throat. That is what Mr Farage has achieved.

I admire the men and women charged with great commercial and industrial responsibilities whose warnings fill increasingly foreboding headlines. Plants closed, investment cancelled or delayed, jobs lost and offices moved to the continent all point in one direction.

Deregulation

We face a future of unprecedented potential. Change is happening in a way my generation and others a great deal younger hardly appreciate.

Brexit's supporters argue for a wave of deregulation. I have spent my life fighting to create a climate of opportunity for the private sector. I think I have privatised more than any one single Minister. As a businessman I know something of the irritation of regulatory obfuscation.

But I also know however something of the way the world works.

I know that the battle for world technological supremacy is driven by the massive defence, space and academic research programmes of the United States, China and a range of increasingly rich nations. Europe together in partnership can compete in this league in a way a nation of our size cannot. Of course private enterprise plays a critical role in exploiting and spreading the benefits into every aspect of our life. The lifeblood fuelling the competition however are the resources and purpose of the state.

I know also that regulations are the building blocks of civilisation and protect all of us from that tiny number of our fellow citizens who will do anything for a quick buck.

Regulations set standards that guarantee our safety and health, protect our environment and a great swathe of modern life.

They also create great new opportunities of the future.

These regulations, these interventions, into the market will enable us to meet the towering challenges of modern times be it climate change, or automation, the refugees problem or the rise of transnational corporations so powerful that they can defy governments and transcend borders.

All these challenges can best be met by nations joining together. All these challenges have been and are being addressed by the European Union. So why do the Brexiteers never give lists of the changes they want to make? There is one simple answer. Such detail would expose their real agenda with the threat it poses to standards most people treasure.

The third Brexit delusion is a stronger more powerful United Kingdom

At the heart of the Brexit case is the future of the United Kingdom. A new place in the world, opportunities to grasp, glory reborn. The easy speech for the cynical opportunist.

Last Sunday revealed a very different, very chilling glimpse of reality. There is now a real prospect that Brexit would break the United Kingdom.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that is the only credible interpretation of the polls.

Nationalism should never be confused with patriotism. I am a European because I want this country to stride the corridors of World power, sit at the top tables, be there where the action is. I am a European because I am a patriot. I have never met a Frenchman, German, Italian or any of the other 24 citizens of Europe who were otherwise.

I will never vote to risk, prejudice or undo this most civilised, constructive, peaceful initiation in the history of our continent.

I have been much criticised for refusing to support Brexit.

I ask my critics:- "What is it you want me to do: to betray everything I've believe all my adult life?"

To explain why every Conservative PM except the last one was wrong? And even she was right in the Referendum itself!

Am I to leave the young generation go hang?

Or is it that I should stay silent?

To wait for Conservative Control Office to send me a little blue book, thumb through the index under Europe and read out the party line?

I can think of a party that does believe that. And it does begin with a C. But it is not the Conservative party I know and to which I have devoted my life.

As a member of that Party I have just one voice. But five million Conservatives like me voted to remain. That is too loud a voice to ignore. Let me spell it out to my parliamentary colleagues.

You seek the vote of a handful of elderly members in what is all that is left of the Conservative Party you want to.

You doff your cap to Mr Farage if you wish.

You turn the Conservative Party into a branch office of Brexit if it suits you but understand that there is a wider audience without which you will never achieve that priceless political privilege – Power - the power to achieve change, the power to make a difference, the power to build a society that you can be proud to call your legacy.

You may think your careers depend on a handful of members of the Conservative Party

That is a grave mistake.

Your careers depend on the young generation between 18 and 25 where today you have the support of only 5%.

Your careers depend on an electorate in which you have majority support only above the age of 51. You need to sit silent, alone in the night and not just ask but answer the question of our time. How do you win these people back?

I warn you. They will not come back by hoping to outflank Mr Farage. Why vote for the monkey when you can have the organ grinder?

They will not come back by the use of that classic weaponry of parts of the Fleet Street print media – the character assassination of political opponents. Mr Corbyn is in just as much trouble as the Conservatives and has just as little prospect of forming a majority government. Social media has changed the political landscape.

For many people who support Brexit, the European election results this week were a verdict on the failure of the Conservative Party Government's failure to deliver promises made in the last referendum.

If we've learnt anything over the past year it must be that we now know that we cannot enjoy all the rights of being a member of the EU with none on the responsibilities that necessarily go with it. The heady, if intellectually incoherent, claim that we can have our cake and eat it has ended up choking the mother of Parliament itself.

The consequence is that there has been no stable majority in Parliament or the country for any specific way of leaving the EU but the Prime Minister is leaving Downing Street, the Government is paralysed and fearful, the domestic agenda is frozen by Brexit, the rest of the world looks on aghast and the Conservatives – what are they doing? They are beginning a summer contest to pick a new leader.

I fear both the process and the result will be one that I, together with many of the five million Conservatives who voted to stay in the European Union at the last referendum, do not like.

Indeed, the prospect of a new Prime Minister being chosen by perhaps little more than 100,000 Conservative Party members in the current circumstances fills me with dread.

We have started an arms race in which candidates vie against each other for who can be the most Faragiste.

This will then be followed by the sight of a new Prime Minister heading to Brussels armed with a mandate from the party to rip up the Withdrawal Agreement and remove the backstop - even

though Theresa May had expressly promised when we secured the extension of Article 50 that the British government would do no such thing.

When this effort fails, our European allies have already told us it will, the new Prime Minister will find the maths in Parliament against agreeing any form of Brexit are unchanged.

The new leader will then face a choice.

Find new words for the same old song. Decide to follow in the invidious tradition of their predecessor. Blame the EU for the failure of Britain's Brexit process and then seek to run the clock down to a default No Deal departure from the EU.

Such a decision, which would deny either Parliament or the people a say on a No Deal outcome that neither wants, would be nothing short of a democratic and constitutional outrage. Parliament will not let it happen.

If successful, the consequences for businesses, for young people and for the integrity of the United Kingdom itself would rightly be hung around the neck of the Conservative Party for a generation to come.

Some will say the new leader could choose to call a General Election or perhaps have one forced upon them after losing a Vote of Confidence. But, with Brexit unresolved and Mr Farage on the march, would any rational Conservative MP want to fight an election now?

The consequence would in any case be either a Tory led or Corbyn led minority hung Parliament that would settle nothing. Or are they planning an alliance between the Conservative Party – the party of Disraeli, Churchill, Macmillan and Thatcher – captured by the narrow nationalism and phobic politics of Nigel Farage?

Neither will solve this Brexit crisis. Neither will bring about the lasting settlement we need.

Many months ago I warned my party that millions of its traditional supporters feel as strongly as I do. I do not need to repeat the warning. Two recent tests of public opinion in the local and European elections have turned that warning into a fact. I say to my party this:

Turn yourselves into branch offices of Brexit if you wish. But if you do so, you are on your own.

Those upon whom you depend to win power in a general election will not come back. Good luck.

Goodbye.

The European election results were not just a verdict on the Conservative Party, however.

They were a damning verdict on Labour's failure on this, the great issue of our times.

Just as I voted Liberal Democrat for the first time in my life because I will not vote to make this country poorer and less powerful, many millions of Labour people voted for parties that gave full, unqualified backing for a People's Vote.

Those traditional supporters will not be going home to the Labour Party until this issue is resolved.

I'm not used to giving advice to Jeremy Corbyn but it is obvious to me, as much as it is obvious to his closest allies in the Shadow Cabinet, that he needs to reconnect as a matter of urgency with the overwhelming majority of his voters.

Indeed, contrary to some of the more excitable parts of the media, these European elections were NOT a mandate for Nigel Farage's plan to crash out of the EU with no trade or security deal at all.

There was no mandate for this humiliating No Deal Brexit in 2016 - when it was barely discussed and people like Mr Farage were talking about how easy it would be to get a deal.

It would be a gross mis-reading of him now winning a few percentage points more than he did with UKIP in a low turnout election to conclude there is now a majority for the crash-out Brexit he wants to inflict on the British people.

The five firmly pro-European parties - the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the SNP, Change UK and Plaid Cymru - won many more votes than the Brexit Party and UKIP combined.

Today, I want to appeal to every sensible Conservative MP, to potential leadership candidates, even to the Labour leader not to force Brexit upon us now.

I ask them to stand up, to speak out for our democratic right to have our say on Brexit.

Whether you want to leave the EU or to stay in, the only way to unlock the Brexit process in parliament, the only way secure a stable majority in Parliament, the only way to legitimise the outcome so we can build a lasting settlement in the country is to give the people the final say.

If we get that final say referendum, I know we must win the case to stay in the European Union.

But I also believe we can, and we will.

The great irony is that today, in the midst of a crisis about Britain leaving the European Union, Britain's pro-Europeans have finally found their voice again.

I marched with a million voices to Parliament Square two months ago.

They are one of the most powerful voices in favour of Europe anywhere in Europe.

We now belong to a great army covering every region and nation of our great country.

We can now genuinely be described as a European Movement.

We know that the inspiration for the European Movement lies in the horrors of three European wars in seventy five years.

Our purpose remains crystal clear.

We stand for a stable, peaceful Europe.

We stand for a union of Parliamentary democracies.

We stand for a home market place big enough to compete.

When our time comes.

We must stand at the bar of history to account to tomorrow's children for our stewardship of their inheritance.

That time has come.

Here we stand.

Here we fight.

Join us.