

A POSITIVE BRITISH REFORM AGENDA FOR EUROPE

By Gordon Brown



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1. ACTION TO CREATE 500,000 JOBS

Our aim as a Labour Party is full employment in Britain and the fast reduction of unemployment right across Europe. The UK European Union Presidency of 2017 can help achieve this aim through an agenda for reforms that will improve the digital economy (which can contribute 25 per cent of increased output), the energy market (15 per cent) and the service sector including financial sectors (just under 60 per cent). Between them, they could create an estimated 500,000 new jobs in Britain in the next decade.

Britain should also benefit from a 16 per cent share of the European Union's €315 infrastructure fund. This €50 billion should be used to finance regeneration and rebuilding infrastructure in some of our hardest hit steel and industrial communities.

2. ACTION TO IMPROVE LIVING STANDARDS THROUGH ENERGY PRICE CUTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

A UK European Presidency next year is also ideally placed to champion the demand for a reformed European energy and environmental policy. This could cut fuel bills for consumers, improve energy security and meet our carbon reduction targets through greater interconnections between states and most of all from greater progress towards a shared continental energy grid. Here the renewable power we generate - primarily North Sea wind and wave which is intermittent and variable - can be integrated, and waste avoided, in a single energy pool across Europe. The wider the energy pool, the more extensive and the more efficient the use of wind and wave will be.

3. ACTION AGAINST TAX HAVENS

While Britain raises taxes without foreign interference - only sales tax is subject to European wide bands - we cannot create a fair tax system without addressing the revenue losses from an estimated €1 trillion of European wealth held offshore in tax havens. Acting alone as an island, and not together as a continent, we can never match the collective clout a united Europe can bring to bear in calling tax havens into line. We should be leading the call for a European strategy that means automatic exchange of tax information and public registers of all companies and trusts in tax havens. Unless progress is made, the UK Presidency should demand that the EU (a) blacklist; (b) sanction and (c) where necessary, impose withholding tax on the havens that have become treasure islands for the tax-avoiding few. This initiative would apply to companies who use transfer pricing as well as tax havens to disguise their true profits and exploit their global status by playing off one tax haven against another.

4. ACTION TO PROTECT WORKERS' RIGHTS

Europe has been responsible for the social chapter which has guaranteed maternity pay, holiday pay, a maximum working week, rights of consultation for workers and rights to be transferred when the company you work for is taken over. By passing laws that apply across the European Union, we not only make sure that Europe has a social dimension – the only continent in the world that legislates social rights for its workers and is more than just a marketplace – but we also prevent the good paying employer and country being undercut by the bad, and the bad by the worst.

In the 1990s the most vulnerable workers were people forced to work long hours and those without statutory protection, such as mothers and pregnant women. Now there is a new group of even more vulnerable workers on zero-hour contracts, whose job security is limited and who will remain vulnerable unless action is taken across Europe. Zero-hour contract workers and all workers on inadequate and insecure contracts should have protection with minimum standards agreed across the European Union. This would protect them against the undercutting of workers in some countries through unfair competition by others in a divisive race to the bottom that benefits only the exploitative employer. Recently the Dutch Government have introduced new levels of protection for vulnerable workers. We should work with the Dutch and other governments to make sure that across the continent workers have these minimum standards of protection and security in employment.

5. ACTION TO ENSURE GREATER SECURITY

Through our own passport controls and border guards, Britain determines the degree to which its borders are open or closed. Yet by two to one in a recent poll, British people agree on the need to expand cross-border co-operation to enhance our security. In our Presidency, we should champion more sophisticated cross-border information and intelligence sharing and policing – including border-checks in Calais – to root out not just terrorist suspects but also people smugglers, criminal gangs and traffickers who profit from abusing the desperation of people who become illegal immigrants.

The biggest complaint people have about migration is about the failure to relieve the pressure on public services like the NHS and schools in places where populations are rising. The last Labour government set up a migration fund to help communities cope. There has been a European initiative to do likewise, but the funds are not sufficient to provide communities with the help they need. The UK Presidency should institute an enhanced solidarity fund for communities where migration trends have put undue pressure on hospitals, schools and other services.