

## Notes from EM Portsmouth and Chichester branch meeting 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2018

We were very pleased to welcome Brendan Donnelly as our guest speaker. A former member of the European Parliament, Brendan is Treasurer of the European Movement and Director of the Federal Trust.

Founded in 1945 on the initiative of Sir William Beveridge, the Federal Trust is a research institute studying the interaction between regional, national, European and global levels of government. The trust has long made a powerful contribution to the study of federalism and federal systems and has always had a particular interest in the European Union and Britain's place in it (<http://fedtrust.co.uk>).

Brendan gave an extremely interesting perspective on where we are with Brexit just now, took a number of very pertinent questions from the audience and then joined in the group discussion about the way forward for campaigning over the next few months. We extend our thanks to Brendan for taking the time to come to Portsmouth. Here are some of the key points from his talk.

- A challenge to those who claim that the Prime Minister triggered Article 50 too early. The Conservative party would not have allowed her to go on much beyond the nine months she had already taken since the referendum.
- There can be no good outcomes from Brexit, just different kinds of a bad deal. There is a choice between joining the EEA, which would be viewed by many brexiteres as political damaging (the UK would become a vassal state), or crashing out (hard Brexit) with no deal, which would incur huge economic damage.
- This 'impossible choice' does suggest some logic behind the persistent "we can have our cake and eat it" claims of the government, as this, if it were possible (which it isn't) would present the only logical argument for leaving the EU.
- So where are we? The UK is only in the first phase of the Brexit process, that is trying to pull together a withdrawal agreement that is acceptable to all parties concerned. While the details of the transition period may form part of the withdrawal agreement, any form of trade agreement is a long way off.
- Claims that the £40 billion 'divorce' payment will help us get a better trade deal are wishful thinking.
- We are reminded that the UK and the Republic of Ireland both joined the EEC (as it was then) on the same day, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1973. Thus, many of the border issues relating to Brexit have never previously arisen. The Good Friday agreement has been facilitated by the countries sharing membership of the European Union.
- The border issue is currently intractable because the DUP, propping up a minority Conservative government, will not accept a special regime for Northern Ireland that creates a degree of separation from the UK., and the EU has rejected the government's two most recent proposals, a Customs Partnership and so-called Maximum Facilitation (Max-fac)
- If the Prime Minister believed that Merkel and Macron would join with in 'fixing' the Irish border issue, she has miscalculated. The EU does not work like that. It comprises 28 countries of all shapes and sizes. The Commission is a defender of the interests of the smaller countries and is a very much a consensus builder.

- At the next meeting of the European Council 28-29 June, there is a high probability that negotiations between the UK and the EU will be suspended, the Irish border issue being one of the main reasons.
- Brendan's most recent article concerning Ireland and published on the Federal Trust website can be found here:

<http://fedtrust.co.uk/brexit-irish-realism-meets-british-wishful-thinking/>

- The “unbending opposition” of the Conservative European Research Group to any accommodation with the EU, combined with the inactivity of Jeremy Corbyn and his closest advisors could create a form of inertia that would force the UK to crash out of the EU on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019.
- However, there is a real possibility that the government will be defeated when it puts the Withdrawal Agreement to the ‘meaningful’ vote in Parliament in the Autumn. But if it was defeated, it is unlikely that the government would accept any instruction to go back to Brussels and renegotiate.
- If the consequence of a defeat meant that the only option was to stay in the EU, this by itself might be enough to persuade Parliament some leading campaigners that the only other viable option would be a referendum on the terms of the withdrawal agreement i.e. the People's Vote. But what exactly would be the wording on the ballot paper?
- Brendan's recent article *Brexit: A “meaningful” vote for MPs implies a “meaningful” vote for the people* can be found here:

<http://fedtrust.co.uk/brexit-a-meaningful-vote-for-mps-implies-a-meaningful-vote-for-the-people/>

- With reference to the outstanding question of the overall objective of the European Movement Brendan was unequivocal. The EM's goal is to stop Brexit.
- Other pro-EU / anti-Brexit groups may appear to be less clear, although some leading campaigners, for example from Open Britain, are more likely playing a tactical game, a one-step at a time approach that leads to there being no Brexit.
- This means that the the EM and other groups must first campaign to be granted the vote and then to ‘win’ the vote by a public rejection of the withdrawal agreement.

### **Campaigning during June**

- It is proposed that we join with EM Sussex to run a street stall in Arundel on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> June. A quick poll during the meeting showed that we should have enough volunteers. Arrangements to be confirmed.
- Most members and supporters are aware of the People's Vote march on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> June. Transport will be by train to either London Waterloo or London Victoria.
- Thank you to those who have already volunteered for People's Vote leaflet letterbox drops in Chichester, Portsmouth South, Purbrook, Hayling Island and Denvilles and Warblington. Volunteers from other areas would be welcome.

Next branch meeting probably in Chichester for a date in July (tbc)

David Rowen - 27/05/18