

*Finnish EU insider wants 'special deal' for post-Brexit Britain*

William Horsley, 19 September 2016

Brexit is a lose-lose situation for the UK and the rest of the EU. Now both sides should negotiate a unique deal on the terms of Britain's departure – including membership of the customs union and special arrangements covering things like foreign policy and banking – so as to avoid further damage to Europe's stability and its liberal values.

That is the considered view of Alex Stubb -- the former prime minister of Finland, respected insider in EU affairs and self-declared friend of Britain, who spoke to journalists at the AEJ meeting at Europe House in London today.

Three months ago Stubb was forced out of his most recent government post as Finland's finance minister, but he still has friends in high places. On his current UK visit he has met two serving British ministers working on the Brexit dossier, as well as David Cameron. He says he will do all in his power to help make Britain's divorce from the European Union 'as amicable as possible'. Alex Stubb echoed the thoughts of a few other European politicians – like the French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron – in wondering aloud if the UK might in the end decide not to leave the EU at all. 'What if...', he mused, 'What if Brexit has not happened before the general election in the year 2020?' ... Might a new mood develop among British people leading to a 'new attempt'?

He concedes that is unlikely. Instead, he has been working up his own blueprint for a 'soft Brexit'. It would, he says, consist of a broad agreement – with many details to be filled in later – that would serve the mutual interest of both sides. Key points of Alex Stubb's self-styled 5-point plan include:-

# The UK keeps up its cooperation with the EU on justice and home affairs. 'You can't fight terrorism without the UK being involved'.

# Coordination in foreign, security and defence policy: the EU and the UK will both be stronger if Britain still works with the rest of Europe on big ticket issues like Syria, Iran and the Middle East.

# Financial services: Stubb thinks the talk about the City's business migrating to Frankfurt or elsewhere in Europe is just 'hot air'. But international banks might be forced out to New York or Hong Kong. So here, too, both sides have a common interest in having the UK linked as closely as possible to Europe.

# The UK should be granted some kind of 'special deal' on access to the single market and the EU's four freedoms', which include free movement. But Britain must accept it would not be at the table for future negotiations in Brussels about trade in goods and services.

# Lastly, the UK should remain inside the EU's customs union; though the price tag for that would be no new bilateral trade agreements with third countries, like China. Alex Stubb admits there's a problem there, because 'Brexiters want both.'

Alex Stubb is not happy about Brexit. He calls it a game-changer for the EU and the UK at a time of European weakness and a dangerous rise in nationalism, xenophobia and hate. But he knows from long experience how slowly the wheels usually turn in Brussels, and he has a parting shot for those who would like to get the UK out of the EU fast. 'People in Britain say it will only take two years' to negotiate Brexit, he remarks. But you can't wipe out 40 years of EU membership with a snap of your fingers.' We all know how long it takes for new members to negotiate accession. 'And leaving the EU is more complicated than accession'.