

Peter Norman reports on the AEJ's Zoom meeting of 26th April 2021 in which João Vale de Almeida, the EU's Ambassador to the United Kingdom, discussed the "Opportunities and challenges of future EU-UK relations".

Headline: EU's Ambassador in London looks ahead in hope of a "dynamic" EU-UK relationship

By Peter Norman, AEJ Meetings Secretary and former Financial Times correspondent

João Vale de Almeida has vast experience in the diplomatic ways of the EU. So it was doubtless a measure of the difficulties he has faced since taking office as the EU's Ambassador in London on February 1st 2020 that he focused his views about the future EU-UK relationship on the very short term: the 100 days between Easter (which was early in April this year) and this year's summer break.

His concentration on the short term reflected a bruising few weeks since the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) – the main Brexit agreement between the two sides -- took effect on January 1st. The first 100 days of the TCA brought the British public and governing circles face to face with many practical and sometimes unwelcome changes resulting from Brexit.

Speaking to a virtual meeting of the UK Section of the Association of European Journalists, with some 50 AEJ-UK members, London-based foreign correspondents and other journalists, Mr Vale de Almeida described how "three 'A's' -- adjustment, adaptation and acceptance" sum up current EU-UK relations.

Adjustment was still a work in progress, and inevitably so because the TCA was only agreed on Christmas Eve last year, just a few days before it had to be implemented. This meant too that only in 2021 did the full impact of the earlier EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement become clear.

It followed that administrations, businesses and citizens needed to adapt and this was especially challenging during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Acceptance, Mr Vale de Almeida noted, was the last of the different "stages of grief". Accepting that Britain was no longer a member of the EU -- with the rights and privileges involved -- is a process still in progress on both sides of the Channel. "We need to accept the new reality. Decisions have consequences, hence the need for adjustment and adaptation", the ambassador said.

In addition, there had been "a few irritants and misunderstandings" in the first 100 days of full Brexit since January 1st. Some relating to borders, the operations of businesses and the Northern Ireland protocol, were Brexit-related. Others, notably the "conversation" around Covid 19 vaccines were not. Mr de Almeida was too much the diplomat to comment on the indignities inflicted upon him and his office by the British government, which so far has formally refused to give him the same diplomatic status as it gives to envoys of nation states. This was a matter for others to work out - although he was confident a solution would be found in line with "accepted international practices".

So, given this background, what were Mr Vale de Almeida's hopes for the future EU-UK relationship?

He hoped that the two sides "can slightly change their mindset" in the 100 days between Easter and the Summer break and move to a "results orientated implementation attitude" focused on delivering:

- i) certainty for our businesses and citizens that now there is a framework in which they can operate;
- ii) help and support and guidance for their adaptation to the new reality; and
- iii) "pragmatic solutions" for problems that may arise. He cited the difficulties in Northern Ireland "where we are working very hard as we speak and especially since Easter to find solutions together within the framework of the protocol."

Looking ahead, Mr Vale de Almeida pointed out that the EU and UK would have tools at their disposal that were missing in the first 100 days of this year. After January 1st, the TCA was being implemented on a provisional and temporary basis because it still needed ratification by the EU. When speaking, Mr Vale de Almeida hoped that ratification would be imminent. The European Parliament was due to debate and vote on the agreement the following day (April 27th) with results due to be announced on April 28th. A positive vote would pave the way for approval by the member states and Council to approve the TCA so that it could be up and running on permanent basis from May 1st.

Ratification would enable "the mechanisms and tools and paraphernalia" of the TCA and the Withdrawal Agreement to take effect. With the planned EU-UK Partnership Council, joint committees and specialised committees in place, Mr Vale de Almeida said he was "sure we can find consensual solutions for the problems that will always arise in such an ambitious and sophisticated relationship as the one we have".

By the Summer break, he hoped the EU and UK could "minimise areas of tension, clarify situations where there is a lack of clarity in terms of common interpretation of provisions and come to consensual solutions through dialogue and diplomacy." However, he made clear that the EU would not shrink from legal action when necessary. It had taken legal action against unilateral UK decisions, he said. "We don't believe unilateral decisions are a solution to problems in the relationship that we are putting together. Only consensual decisions provide solutions to problems."

The ambassador said cooperation between the EU and UK would improve once the TCA framework is working better. Remarking on the start of "fruitful discussions", he held out the hope of progress on cooperation and eventual equivalence in the regulation of financial services following agreement recently on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the EU and UK. While working as EU ambassador to the US, he had seen how an MOU between the EU and US had fostered regulatory cooperation in financial services.

Looking further ahead, the ambassador said he would like to see relations between the EU and UK continue in the spirit of recent weeks and along a track to find "ways of maximising cooperation and looking at things we can do together."

The June Group of Seven summit in Cornwall would provide one such opportunity. It will be attended by the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Council President Charles Michel and US President Joe Biden. There was a great deal of convergence among these actors and the UK on the big agenda issues of health and overcoming the Covid pandemic, climate change and economic recovery and resilience, the ambassador said.

Mr Vale de Almeida argued that the strategic and global interests of the EU and UK are highly convergent. "So much brings us together and for good reason," he said, citing geography, common history, economic interdependence and ties in academia. "We are destined to cooperate".

Bringing his opening comments to a close (the subsequent Q&A was held under the Chatham House Rule and therefore is not being reported here), the ambassador said there was a rationale for what he termed a "quality" - as opposed to special - relationship between the EU and UK.

He expressed the hope that the EU and UK could develop a "dynamic relationship" as partners and competitors in which they "can and should maximise" areas of convergence and agreement.

"Much as the EU and UK need each other, the world needs us to be partners, cooperating but also competing, " he said.