

Lord Adonis speaks on 'Stopping Brexit' at Lunchtime Meeting with the AEJ on 9 November 2017

Summary by AEJ member Peter Norman

During the past six months the possibility has emerged of stopping Brexit, according to Lord (Andrew) Adonis, a Labour peer, former Labour Minister for education and transport, and then the Conservative government's infrastructure chief.

Speaking to the AEJ's lunchtime meeting on November 9th when he was still chair of the UK's National Infrastructure Commission, Lord Adonis said the next 18 months would be crucial for reversing the "avoidable madness" of the 2016 Referendum decision to leave the EU, with key events likely in the summer and autumn of 2018 when the important decisions over Britain's future relationship with the EU will fall due.

Reversing Brexit would first require "an increasingly large, sensible group of vocal politicians to say that Brexit needs to be reversed." Putting the chances of halting Brexit at "50-50 at best", Lord Adonis argued that a change in government policy could then hinge on a crisis in the Conservative Party around autumn next year.

A revolt by 20 to 30 Conservative MPs against a Hard Brexit and "cliff edge" departure from the EU in favour of staying in the single market and EU customs union would immediately raise the question as to whether the UK would be better off staying in the EU rather than leaving and trying to negotiate its own special deal with Brussels.

Once government or parliament realised the UK could not obtain advantageous trading relations with the EU outside the single market and customs union, the government should decide to stop Brexit, seek an agreement with France and Germany on how to stay in the EU and "sell it to the country", he said. It could even opt for another referendum on EU membership as a way of holding the government together, a scenario that Lord Adonis described as "not likely, but possible".

If, on the other hand, Theresa May or a successor as Tory prime minister held the Conservative Party together behind a hard Brexit, then a hard Brexit would happen. The UK would pay a heavy price for shutting itself out of Europe, leaving the next generation to reapply to join the EU in 10 to 15 years' time on far less favourable terms in a "ghastly process".

In the near term, Lord Adonis said he expected agreement between the UK and EU on the divorce terms: the financial settlement, the post-Brexit rights of EU citizens resident in the UK and UK citizens in the EU, and the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

But, passing on information garnered in an end-October visit to Brussels, he warned that the UK could not rely on an extended "implementation period" following the March 29 2019 Brexit deadline to defer a cliff edge departure from the EU. The legal authorities in Brussels would not allow any extension of such a transition period beyond 18 months to 2 years.

Without an agreement on the future relationship, Britain could face a delayed cliff edge in 2021, which could be just before the next UK general election.

Lord Adonis was sharply critical of David Cameron, the former British prime minister, for failing to achieve meaningful concessions from the EU side before last year's referendum vote. He argued that Mr Cameron could have won agreement on an 'emergency brake' to control the very high levels of inward migration to the UK from central and eastern Europe, if he had deployed determined, hard-line tactics towards the other EU states on an issue that had generated much anti-EU feeling among British voters. Lord Adonis asserted that the EU's mantra that the Union's Four Freedoms are indivisible was 'nonsense' and should have been more vigorously challenged.

This AEJ meeting took place at a time of turmoil in Theresa May's minority government, on the day after the resignation of a second cabinet minister within a week. But Lord Adonis said the government was a lot stronger than it appeared and could last quite a long time, largely because the Ulster Democratic Unionist party would never vote against the Tories as long as Jeremy Corbyn was leader of the Labour Party. Even though Mr Corbyn himself was only "narrowly pro-European", he predicted that the Labour Party would move towards an increasingly European position. If his hopes for a Tory revolt were realised, "at every stage of the process, Labour would be for more Europe, not less Europe."

Lord Adonis admitted it was only after this year's June general election, when the Conservatives lost their House of Commons majority, that he decided Britain might be able to stay in the EU. Having focused his political career on domestic matters, he was now campaigning actively to stay in the EU, with a book in preparation and plans to take his message to every university in the land.

The irony of Brexit was that the UK had a "lot going for it". Speaking as NIC chair, he was notably upbeat about the country's infrastructure plans, arguing that since the Olympics in 2012, the UK has rediscovered the virtues of long term infrastructure planning, although 'the ability to pay for it' would depend, he said, on how Brexit is handled over the coming years.

London's transport system was unrivalled by any world city, with the possible exception of Tokyo. UK infrastructure was "head and shoulders" above the US. London's Heathrow airport was "arguably the most successful airport in the world" despite the long delays in deciding over a new third runway, which he supports. The new HS2 rail line would bring London, Birmingham and Manchester closer together, creating an economically beneficial agglomeration. The UK stood out with a high ratio of top universities to population. Although it lagged world leaders in digital and broadband coverage, this could be corrected relatively simply by action of the regulator.

And yet the country was "about to commit a fundamental, first rate error" that would relegate the UK to the second division of leadership in Europe. Although Brexit might work in the short term, the lesson of the past 500 years was that the UK needs to be involved in Europe because geography meant it would be "sucked in" to any crisis. For example, it

would be “inconceivable” that Britain wouldn’t get sucked in “if the Russians under Putin or a successor” wanted to engage in seriously undermining the democracies of central Europe.

Lord Adonis concluded the meeting with an appeal to the other EU members “to seize the opportunity and do everything possible to facilitate” continued British membership should UK politics shift that way next year. With Britain no longer an EU member, 80% of the resources of NATO would be outside the EU – a matter of strategic concern for Europe in view of Russian and Chinese ambitions. Summing up, he therefore stressed that the UK staying in the EU is “absolutely the right policy” for the other member states as well as Britain.