

## AEJ Meeting with Lord (Paddy) Ashdown on October 12 2017: Summary

**Paddy Ashdown, Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon, is the former leader of the Liberal Democrats (1988 to 1999) and now the party's leading elder statesman. A bitter opponent of Brexit, he spoke to the AEJ's lunchtime meeting on 12 October, painting a grim picture of a dysfunctional UK government that is incapable of negotiating a satisfactory withdrawal from the EU and which could collapse next year. By a narrow margin, he believes Britain will stay in the EU but retreat from an active international role and lose global influence. Drawing on his many and varied experiences as a Royal Marine, intelligence officer, diplomat, politician and international administrator, Lord Ashdown also commented on a range of international issues in this "most dangerous, volatile and frightening age" of his lifetime. Peter Norman's summary of his remarks and the subsequent discussion follows.**

Lord (Paddy) Ashdown, the guest speaker at the AEJ lunch time meeting on 12 October, has changed his mind about the prospects for Brexit. As recently as July, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats was expecting Brexit to take place. Now, by a narrow margin, he thinks Brexit will not happen.

The reason, he told the AEJ in London, was the sheer dysfunctionality of the UK government. "I can't remember a government so at war with itself," he exclaimed. To find anything similar, it was necessary to go back to the 1840s, when a dispute over the Corn Laws pitched internationalists against protectionists, shattering the Tory party of Robert Peel and putting it out of power for a generation.

Speaking on the subject of "Brexit and beyond", Lord Ashdown predicted that the dysfunctionality of the government meant it would be unable to negotiate Brexit or get Brexit through the House of Commons in any form: whether "hard" or "soft" Brexit or simply by crashing out of the EU.

Meanwhile, the UK's economic prospects were deteriorating, with public services – led by the National Health Service – under severe strain. In these circumstances, the country could "wake up some Monday morning in the cold, dark miserable days of February" to find Ulster's Democratic Unionist Party had ceased to support the government and "by Thursday it would be gone".

Alternatively, prime minister Theresa May could be ousted by her own party in which case her replacement would "be bound to be a hard line Brexiteer as prime minister". Either way, the upshot would be parliamentary stalemate so that "sometime before the end of 2018" the UK would have either a new referendum or an election. In these circumstances, the country would be likely to vote in the Labour Party under its leftist leader Jeremy Corbyn and "Britain for the next three to four years would have as much weight on the international scene as Portugal".

Lord Ashdown made clear that his predictions were contingent on "things getting worse" in the UK and a change in the public mood towards blaming Brexit for this. He told the meeting to look beyond Westminster for signs of moderates mobilising politically, as happened with the En Marche movement in France, which propelled Emmanuel Macron to the French presidency this year. "British politics can't stay in this shape. It is unsustainable", he said.

Lord Ashdown began by framing his remarks on Brexit in the context of "extraordinarily worrying times".

"This is the most dangerous, volatile and frightening age through which I've ever lived", he said. The established world order looked to be falling apart. Everywhere institutions were failing,

governments were in decline and the public was in revolt. Europe was sandwiched between the most assertive and aggressive Russian leader and the most isolationist US president of modern times while new economic powers were rising to challenge Europe's position on the world stage.

Lord Ashdown saw only two points of light in this "miserable and frightening world". One was the "very remarkable" deal to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, which US President Donald Trump had set out to destroy.

The other was the apparent decision of the 27 EU countries other than Britain to reject what he called 'Anglo-Saxon isolationism and exceptionalism' and seemingly plot their future in European solidarity under the lead of French President Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Reinforcing Lord Ashdown's hopes for Europe was the recovery of the Continental economy where growth was now faster than in the UK.

Confronted with the argument that that the EU is dysfunctional and rigid and failed to reflect the popular will, he argued that no European country could be nationally sovereign in today's world. The EU, he argued, was the best way to deliver what the British people want. "I believe, by and large, that the problems of Europe are not getting greater but are going away."

In a lively discussion, Lord Ashdown drew on his vast domestic and international experience to:

- lament the professionalization of politicians and the growth of "managerialism" in politics. There was a lack of "big beasts" in UK politics today as evidenced by the debates on Brexit.
- argue that the Trump administration was more in breach of the Iranian nuclear deal than Iran: "Before Trump, all our information was that Iran was compliant." But since President Trump had turned against the deal, Iran was taking what he called "insurance measures".
- call on Europe for a "proper, regional policy" for the Western Balkans, where he served as International High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2002 and 2006, adding that President Macron and Chancellor Merkel understood the need for this. It was not feasible to bring Serbia and the other states into the EU. There was "unfinished business" including corruption and nationalism in Serbia. He was "very worried" about Macedonia while Montenegro had been "pretty much bought by the Russian mafia". Kosovo was not the most important issue: it would be solved over time. His biggest concern was Bosnia, where state building had "gone into reverse" and which was a "potential flashpoint".

He also warned that Northern Ireland could be the part of the UK where the union would break under the strain of Brexit. He noted that recent opinion polls suggested that middle class protestants in Northern Ireland were more inclined to opt to stay in Europe than the UK.

Finally, he was asked for his assessment of China's emergence as a global imperial power. There was, he said, hardly any superpower in history that had behaved as well. There were frictions and China had made mistakes in the past. But Lord Ashdown believed "they now want to be a good world citizen."

Western nations should learn from "the biggest strategic mistake of the past 40 years" which was to humiliate Russia after the fall of the Berlin Wall and "reach out" to China, he said.

Ends