

On Wednesday, January 29th, 2020 the AEJ held a lunchtime meeting with Rory Stewart, former Conservative cabinet minister, Brexit rebel and independent candidate for the May 2020 Mayor of London election. The venue was Herringham Hall at Regent's University London.

By Peter Norman

A packed crowd of AEJ members, guest journalists, and Regent's University staff and students heard Rory Stewart, last year's surprise "rock star" performer in the contest to lead the Conservative Party and now -- out of parliament and the party -- an independent candidate in the May 7 London Mayoral elections, deliver an impassioned plea for post-Brexit Britain not to neglect the contributions and importance of its capital city.

Speaking to the theme of *UK national politics and Brexit; democratic renewal and the role of cities*, Mr Stewart spelled out how London could have a "very, very central" part to play in Britain's future relations with the European Union, while its connections and contributions were crucial to the success of the rest of the UK and amounted to far more than the annual £38 billion of taxes channelled to other regions.

In his opening remarks, Mr Stewart sought to address the demands and needs of London voters, while also presenting his vision of a London mayor who would act as an ambassador for the city to the rest of the world, the rest of Europe and the rest of the UK. Extolling London as a city "at the prow of the bow of history" and as "one of the first great mega-cities of the world", Mr Stewart noted how London and its interests had barely featured in any of the party manifestos of the UK's December 2019 general election.

Yet London, spread out over 1,400 square miles, with its population of nearly 9 million, 38% of whom were born outside the UK, speaking 100 languages, had a huge amount to offer as a 21st century city. As London prepares for Brexit, Mr Stewart suggested it could act as a bridge between Britain and the EU over the next 10 to 15 years in areas such as artificial intelligence, robotics and nanotechnology while still learning from policies in other European cities. Here he mentioned Amsterdam on cycling, Barcelona on data and Helsinki on rough sleeping and homelessness.

But first, the future mayor would have to deal with some serious problems, requiring executive action. Mr Stewart named three "fundamentals": How to make London safer; how to keep it moving; and how to provide affordable housing.

On safety, where the capital is experiencing an epidemic of knife crime, he promised to triple the numbers of police officers on the streets and strengthen their backup.

On transport, where surface travel is slower than a century ago, he promised improvements to the tube, notably through an upgrade to signalling on the Piccadilly Line, and more creative use of the River Thames.

On housing, he pointed to the 200,000 housing units in London with planning permission that were not being built and how average rents in London amounted to an unaffordable 105% of a teacher's or nurse's salary. The model of expecting the private sector to provide sufficient affordable housing on new land wasn't working. The answer lay in using public land for public housing which government would build.

Warming to his theme, Mr Stewart reeled off a succession of policy ideas for the capital: for combatting loneliness, improving mental health, better community relations, more trees and reinvigorating moribund high streets dotted around the 700 or so "villages" that make up London. He would, he said, be a "listening" mayor, learning at first hand about the real needs of Londoners.

Returning to the subject of London in Europe, he stressed how it was the mayor's job to make the case for immigration -- and do this "now, now, now and now". The post-Brexit immigration models under consideration would not work for London, where the health service, tech sector, computer industries and others rely on immigration from Europe. "If we don't sort this out, an EU citizen coming with a family to try to work in London could end up spending up to £20,000 in visa fees," he said. This was "completely unimaginable".

If Brexit is to work for London, market access rather than deregulation should be the UK focus in negotiations with the EU. He wants to set up a network of about 40 honorary consuls in EU countries -- a "new Hanseatic League" -- to represent British interests from the perspective of the UK as a great European power and London as a great European city.

European citizens need to find their place in this city, he said. He pointed out that London is home to 1.1 million European citizens who are entitled to vote in the mayoral election. The total vote turnout for the winning candidates in the last mayoral election was about 1.1 million votes. So European voters hold in their hands the ability to decide who becomes mayor of London. Appealing to EU nationals to register to vote, he urged them to vote for "a city that works", for "less politics and more action", and for himself as the independent candidate with these priorities.

Rory Stewart concluded his opening remarks after 24 minutes. There followed a lively, wide ranging and informative Q&A session which covered topics as varied as the state of party politics in Britain, Mr Stewart's prospects for election to the London mayoralty, his policy priorities if elected, the pros and cons of market access to the EU versus deregulation for post-Brexit London, and whether Hong Kong-born Rory Stewart has real London credentials.

Mr Stewart made clear his distaste for the current state of party politics in the UK, where the Conservative and Labour parties respectively have moved further to the right and left. Making the case for Britain was "not about putting three words on a baseball cap". There was a "gaping hole in the centre of politics." Mature and educated politics should listen to people and recognise that local communities care more and can do more than any professional politician.

That was why the issues of crime and making London safer were so important. Making London safe was "absolutely fundamental" for the mental health of its citizens, the attractiveness of the city and its vital theatre and entertainment sectors for foreign visitors, and for business confidence and investment. He promised to resign, if as mayor, he couldn't reduce crime on London's streets.

He was asked how he would pay for the increase in police on the streets. The mayor had the power to raise local (council) taxes - something previous mayors could have done but didn't, he claimed. In addition, some central government money had been promised especially to boost police numbers.

When it came to transport and policing, the London Mayor had more powers than the high profile Mayor of New York, he said. But the current incumbent, Sadiq Khan, had "failed to deliver". He added that he would have to make some "very tough decisions in the first 100 days" if elected. He would need two four-year terms in the office and was prepared to be very unpopular at the end of his first two years before expecting to see real improvements.

Mr Stewart declined to be too specific when asked what tough measures were in prospect for fear, he said, that Mr Khan would steal his policies -- something which he claimed had already happened on police numbers. However, he indicated that London transport fares would be under serious review. While protecting the poorest, Transport for London had to pay its way and not depend on cross subsidisation from the sale of public land as at present.

On wider economic issues, Mr Stewart came out in favour of more tax on digital companies and working with the UK government to achieve this end. He explained his preference for market access to the EU over deregulation because it would benefit London more. Taking the City as an example, he suggested that while insurance might benefit from some deregulation, market access really mattered for the bigger banking sector.

Asked about promoting the use of electric cars in London, Mr Stewart was highly critical of bureaucratic restrictions that hindered the creation of charging points. London was also failing to use its negotiating muscle in ways that would encourage the development of a battery industry.

Although Mr Khan was a formidable opponent, Mr Stewart insisted there was a "strong possibility" he could win the London mayoral election because he stood to gain from the supplementary vote system used in the capital. He said he saw his independence from the main political parties as an advantage.

But is he sufficiently a Londoner to hope to win the election? He insisted he is. Although born in Hong Kong, he had moved to London as a child and been educated in London before the family moved abroad again. He lived in the same house as he had as a baby and used the same public park and doctor's surgery.

True, he had lived in other different cities in an extraordinarily varied career. Most recently he was a member of parliament for a north of England constituency. He also speaks nine languages. But his own experiences would be beneficial if he became mayor of London, he said. They would help him understand all the different constituent parts of London's population. They would also help him be ambassador for London to the world and the rest of the UK.