



Report – Grassroots for Europe Round Table #12 23 February 2021

Chair: Sharon Leclercq-Spooner

Speakers: Lionel Barber, Former Editor of the FT & Current Investor in The New European
Naomi Smith, CEO of Best for Britain

Lionel Barber: “The State of the Union – A Realistic Perspective”

Background

- I count myself a European. Even if what I have to say is as a realist, bear in mind that I love both France and Germany. Spent 6 years as the FT bureau head at Brussels during the time of Maastricht and the currency crises, where I worked alongside Boris Johnson working for the Daily Telegraph and got to know him.
- I was Editor of the Financial Times and, as such, interviewed European leaders. The Financial Times clearly supported Remain as we understood the harm of the Brexit Vote. But Leave won – identity politics trumped the economic and rational choice.
- The New European was a pop-up newspaper with a loyal following and a strong voice and now I will be engaged on helping to create a new strategic direction for it.

Looking Forward

- The UK needs a realistic view and an informed debate, moving away from stereotypes and lazy imagery; the EU is neither a corpse nor a European superstate in the making. There was a sovereign debt crisis and Mario Draghi and Angela Merkel decided to hold the Euro together prizing Monetary Union over Fiscal Prudence.
- There are 3 areas of new development since then:
 - **The 2020 Recovery Fund** - The decision by the EU to borrow in the bond markets. This is not a “Hamilton” moment, not the first step in a financial union. Europe has 27 states and does not work with “big bangs”, but incrementally. It is not a superstate yet, even if the potential is there.
 - **The Investment Treaty with China** - Negotiated against the wishes of the US, this is intended to stop the EU being sandwiched between the US and China, and to establish strategic sovereignty, even though the EU soft peddled on human rights. This is about hedging the EU bets in the stand-off between the US and China.
 - **Brexit** - The UK talks too much about how it affects the UK alone. It also affects the behaviour of the EU, trade budgeting, enlargement plans. UK departure will swing influence in the direction of Germany, but new coalitions and alliances will emerge and new players such as Sweden, Spain (despite internal issues) and Italy will become important.
- So, even if the EU is not a serious superstate yet, the possibilities are there.

What does this mean for the UK - What are the new terms of engagement for the UK with this new EU?

- **We are not going to Rejoin soon** - The war is over, and most sensible people acknowledge it is best not to be at economic war with our closest trading neighbours with supply chain disruption.
- **The City is not going to fall apart** - despite the shift of business to Amsterdam. There is a slow puncture and there will be a loss of business but this is not the time to run the City down. There will be a short term hit to growth and some lost opportunities, but it is manageable and some opportunities not in the current financial model will appear.
- **The vaccine issue insights** - The EU has not come out well on vaccination programme: the solidarity, slow convoy model bringing everyone along adopted by the Commission led to delays. Britain may not have done better but it won the race.
- **The UK needs a sensible pro-European voice** - The campaign based on fear factors was ludicrous. The political case for being in the EU was not clearly made, so what arguments are we going to make:
 - Attack stereotype depictions of the EU.
 - Say what we are missing out on from Europe.
 - Draw attention to the small stuff and practical level issues that will affect us and business.
 - Educate the young about Europe and the EU, especially through the curriculum in schools.
 - Lay the ground for a future campaign about Rejoining, making a positive case for the EU.
 - Be constructive as well and have arguments ready. The fear factor was exaggerated and in some cases ridiculous and did not work in 2016, because parties had not made the positive case previously.

Questions

1. How do we get the UK government to put education about Europe back into the curriculum when they won't advocate for Erasmus?

LB - The cabinet is currently distorted by the need to have the Brexiteers in there. Talk to Labour, as there is already pressure for decolonisation and identity politics being added to courses. Talk about the advantages of language education in developing children. Advocate for courses about EU development and languages in schools.

2. While acknowledging the comment about not being "miserabilist", there are negative impacts of Brexit which need to be highlighted. Not crying wolf, but pointing out the negatives is vital. Pro Brexit press pound away at their messages; we need to pound away at our side and have the New European to stand up for us.

LB - Pointing out the negative impact of Brexit is not the whole tablet of news for us. Reminding people what has been lost and what is going wrong, but define what you stand FOR as well what we are against.

3. Drawing on a discussion in the Liberal Democrat Euro Group about steps to the road back. Is it desirable to be part of the Single Market without being a full member? Would being part of the Customs Union solve most of the problems even if it meant being a rules taker? Is Free Movement still the big battleground it was in the Referendum? Should we skip or aim for the half-way houses?

LB - The FT and I don't think the Norway rule-taker position will work. The Customs Union was a good landing point if Labour could have got its head round that, but that has gone. It is legitimate to attack the pettiness that makes the relationship worse, e.g. on the EU Ambassador status. So, aiming for an arrangement that does not make things worse lets time heal the wounds. We should continually argue for as close a relationship with the EU, as possible.

4. We find it difficult to get into the mainstream media. How do we articulate these messages when the same old people are asked onto the debate panels etc? The clique of commentators just repeat the cliches you don't want us to use.

LB - Pro European groups need to address this internally. Who are the European spokespeople of the main political parties? What are Pro European people saying that is different from others? (Bob Zoellick talking on how the US can help UK in a post Brexit world.) Play the diversity card – talk about the diversity of opinion. Don't expect older white establishment men to be invited onto Question Time. Outflank and challenge them on balancing the voices.

5. Communicating with young people is not always through schools. Young people distrust mainstream media and the BBC, but there is an opportunity for the New European to speak to them via Instagram and Tik Tok as the NE is not as old school. How do the NE and we engage in a 20-year long war?

LB - Young People's views are different. The New European has no digital strategy and needs to figure out how to be cool and digital. We need to point out in appropriate language what they are missing outside the EU.

6. You say identity politics trumped rational choice. What do we do about identity politics ?

LB Explain to people that they have multiple identities.

7. Labour pro-Europe groups don't seem ready to talk about Rejoin yet, but those people are not the enemy of the Pro Europe movement.

LB - Labour needs to take the higher ground in response to Brexit, pick out key areas or policies on which we should work with the EU.

8. Well done on supporting the New European – more people should do that. Turning this around so that being pro-European becomes “funky” will need serious investment in journalism. Why don't you ask the pro-European movement to help with that? What do you need to do raise the quality of the input without losing the passion?

LB - We have 20k subscribers. What is the New European FOR, as well as being against Brexit?

9. Comment from Naomi Smith on Labour strategy and young people: How do we educate young people to be internationalist and less “nativist”?

Best for Britain has just hired some Tik Tok natives, but are aiming at the 14-18 market who have only ever known Trump and Johnson. They will be eligible to vote at the next GE and they have worrying attitudes, even if the older cohort, currently 18-25, are on board.

Naomi Smith, Best for Britain: “Cross-Party Alliance Analysis - Preparing the ground”

Naomi presented key insights from BfB’s latest polling analysis, which highlighted that Labour would win up to 351 seats by working with other internationalist parties at the next election. A 20,000-person sample focaldata poll published last week showed the Conservatives’ 80-seat majority crumbling, with Labour set to win back seats across the North and Midlands. The poll had the Conservatives on 284 seats, with Labour on 283. Link here:

[NEW ANALYSIS: Labour would win up to 351 seats by working with Greens and Lib Dems - Best for Britain](#)

Question: What do you want / need the activists to do?

This info does not consider the constituency boundary changes being introduced by the Tory government. It will take more hard work and collaboration to defeat Johnson's government than it took to defeat the long-standing Tory govt in 1997.

The growth of Greens and decline of Lib Dems are trends and this is only a snapshot of the present - much will depend on the future direction of the parties in the alliance.

Activists can advocate for Progressive Alliance policies within their own political parties and make sure that decision making on progressive alliances are made at central party level rather than at local level where either obstruction from local opposition creates difficulty.

The progressive alliance deal broking has to be done centrally. The Language used in the conversation over the next few months and years matters. Don't say PR (too technical). Say "Fair Vote" or "Equal Vote". Talk about "minority govt" under first past the post system where a majority popular vote does not deliver a majority of seats in Parliament.

Even if not campaigning this spring (BfB are not), talk about why Scottish, Welsh and London systems are different and how this produces a more balanced government.

Talk about how narrow majorities produce disproportionate power - as polls stand, only a Progressive Alliance will overcome the Tory majority.