

No more denial: let's accept the inevitable and fight for the best Brexit we can

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17/07/2016

Many supporters of remaining in the EU are in denial about Brexit, writes [Simon Hix](#). But if the referendum result is not accepted, the 48% who voted to stay are in danger of being sidelined in an extremely important debate. We need to accept the fact that the UK is leaving the EU, and emerge from it with the best possible deal. He identifies four policies pro-European Leavers – as well as dismayed Remainers – could adopt.



Remainers need to accept that the Commons is unlikely to overturn the referendum result. Chris Hanretty [has estimated](#) that a majority voted for Leave in 421 Westminster constituencies. Many of the Remain MPs, in both the Conservatives and Labour, will quickly change their positions. Parliament will also not want to provoke a constitutional crisis by voting against a popular majority.

So we are leaving the EU, and the sooner this is accepted by Remain voters and campaigners, the sooner we can think about what the majority of the British people want in terms of Britain's future relations with the EU. Denying the referendum result also ignores an underlying reality: that the UK has been drifting from the centre of gravity in Europe for several decades. We may have been leaders on the single market and enlargement in the 1980s and 1990s, but since then we have become increasingly isolated. Our political elites, in both Labour and the Conservatives, have never accepted that the EU is a political project, not just an economic one, and this is unlikely to change. We have been heading for the exit door for some time.

The new Conservative cabinet seems to be divided between two groups:

The **hard-Brexiteers**, such as the Brexit secretary David Davis and international trade secretary Liam Fox, who want a clean break with the EU – which may mean leaving the single market, restrictions on immigration, perhaps a new free trade agreement with the EU, new trade deals with other countries, and radical deregulation and tax-cutting to maintain our global competitiveness.

The **reluctant-Remainers**, such as chancellor Philip Hammond and home secretary Amber Rudd, in contrast, are likely to favour moving into the European Economic Area temporarily, but only if the UK can extract concessions from the EU to allow restrictions on the free movement of people.

Beyond that, there does not seem much else this group can agree on – and with Theresa May's commitment that "Brexit means Brexit", I suspect the hardliners will win out in cabinet battles over the choices ahead.

A pro-European Leave position

What is missing, then, is a "pro-European Leave" position. This is not a misnomer. This position accepts that we are leaving the EU, but also sets out a set of policies to establish a close and permanent relationship between the UK and the EU. This would be the preferred outcome of a clear majority of voters: most of the 16.1 million who voted to remain, as well as many of the so-called "liberal leavers". For example, a recent poll by [ORB found that 20%](#) of Leave voters would prioritise single market access over restricting immigration. This position could entail four main policies.

First, the UK should be a member of the European Economic Area for as long as possible, to preserve free movement of goods, services and capital, including "passporting" for financial services. This may not be sustainable in the long-run, as the EEA was not designed for a large country like the UK. In the longer term, a new framework

for “not in the EU, but in the European single market” might emerge, but that is not on the table at the moment.

Second, the UK should maintain free movement of people, but with an “emergency brake”, if that is achievable. Yes, many people voted Leave to restrict immigration. However, maintaining free movement of people is vital for our service economy, including the creative industries and our universities as well as financial services, and is crucial for younger generations of Brits who value this “right”. Maintaining free movement of people may be the only way to remain in the EEA. Free movement of people would guarantee the rights of 1.2 million Brits living elsewhere in the EU and the 3 million EU citizens currently in the UK. [Recent survey data from YouGov](#) suggests that a narrow majority of British citizens still favour free movement of people. Also, with a falling pound, a downturn in the British economy, and fears of xenophobia in Britain, there is likely to be a significant drop in EU migrants coming to the UK in the next few years, which will take some of the sting out of this issue.

It might be possible to negotiate an emergency brake within the EEA, such as a monthly quota on the number of national insurance numbers issued to EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens elsewhere in the EU. But if that is not achievable, we should accept free movement and commit to keep negotiating on this issue, as part of a reform of free movement in the EEA or even in the EU as a whole, which is now on the table.

In addition, supporting the continued free movement of people should be combined with flanking policies to address the legitimate concerns of the millions of people negatively affected by large-scale migration. For example, the government should clamp down on employers who pay cash to undercut the minimum wage, and there should be targeted public spending to alleviate pressure on schools, hospitals, and housing.

Third, there should be close social and cultural co-operation with the EU. This should include UK participation in educational exchanges such as Erasmus, European scientific co-operation such as the European Research Council and the Horizon2020 research programme, and European film and TV collaboration such as the MEDIA programme. This would be valuable for cultural engagement and social relations, and would also be critically important for the economic interests of our universities, our scientific researchers and our creative industries, [who contribute £84bn per year to the UK economy](#). In practice, this policy would mean the UK paying into these parts of the EU budget, but this would be a small price to pay for the funds received and for a ‘seat at the table’ when key decisions are made about European education, science and media.

Fourth, there should be close UK-EU security co-operation. We cannot allow the UK leaving the EU to destabilise European security, for example by encouraging Putin to stoke up trouble in the Baltic States. The UK should commit to close and permanent foreign, security and defence co-operation with the EU, such as collaboration between foreign policy and defence officials and an annual UK-EU security summit.

Who will make the case?

These positions are surely supported by almost all of the 48 per cent who voted Remain. They are also supported by many of the “liberal leavers”, [who perhaps make up 10-15 per cent of the Leave voters](#). In other words, a large majority of the British people want the UK to maintain the closest possible relations with the EU. In contrast, only a small minority supports the version of Brexit advocated by the leading Brexiteers in Theresa May’s cabinet.

The problem, though, is that no one seems to be articulating this “pro-European” version of Brexit. The Labour party is embroiled in in-fighting, while the Liberal Democrats are promising to campaign in the next election to take Britain back into the EU. Could a new movement emerge from the Britain Stronger In campaign? Could someone on the moderate wing of Labour step up to articulate this vision? Could someone on the pro-European wing of the Conservatives step forward? Or could a new party be created from outside parliament, by civil society leaders, industrialists and representatives from the creative industries, and intellectuals and opinion formers?

Without a new force to articulate these views, to represent the majority of the public who want a close and permanent relationship between Britain and Europe, we may end up isolated from our continent, and suffering the

disastrous economic, political and social consequences that will result.

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