

Brexit: Lord Adonis comes to St Nicolas'

An interesting public meeting was organised by the cross-party European Movement at our Community Centre before Easter. Lord Adonis, Member of the House of Lords, came down from London to explain the current Brexit situation. Our Hall capacity meant that the meeting was hugely oversubscribed, so for those who wanted to come but applied for tickets too late, here are a few notes.

Lord Adonis is a well-informed, persuasive and witty speaker who leaves little doubt as to where he stands. Without taking sides, the following struck me as factual information which is remarkably under-reported in the current media battle and therefore worth highlighting:

1. The EU started as a fine, high-minded peace initiative after WW2. Initially an iron and steel community founded on the 1951 Treaty of Paris, the aim was to provide stability by sharing resources. The opening phrases of the treaty make interesting reading:



Article 2

"The mission of the European (Coal and Steel) Community is to contribute to economic expansion, the development of employment and the improvement of the standard of living in the participating countries through the institution, in harmony with the general economy of the member States, of a common market..."

Article 3

"...[to] see that conditions are maintained which will encourage enterprises to expand and improve their ability to produce and to promote a policy of rational development of natural resources, avoiding inconsiderate exhaustion of such resources"

"...[to] further the development of international trade and see that equitable limits are observed in prices charged on external markets;"



These principles of keeping peace and economic harmony by sharing resources and access to markets and safeguarding our jobs are still fundamental to the work of the EU.

2. *The improvement of the living and working conditions* (above) includes protecting us by common environmental and food production standards, e.g. banning the sale of chlorinated chicken in 1997, (a practice widely used in the US which can conceal overcrowding and poor hygiene in farming) and in 2013 restricting the use of pesticides containing neonicotinoids to protect honey bees.



3. The Irish border poses a practical difficulty to leaving the EU. Its open operation and smooth running have been acknowledged by all sides as vital for peace in Northern Ireland.



The Irish Backstop means that if no trade deal is negotiated or if UK trading standards diverge too far from European ones, to all intents and purposes N.Ireland will remain in the EU.

As part of his duties, Lord Adonis visited countries whose borders are proposed as solutions to the Irish border and found the following:

- Swedish/Norwegian border: closes at 10pm
- Swiss/French border: guards require detailed forms for items bigger than a “chicken”, often creating a wait of 1 hour or more
- Canadian/US border: manned by armed guards



4. The “Norwegian compromise” put forward as a possible model for Brexit holds the freedom of movement as integral to the agreement
5. The £39bn divorce deal simply means paying off an outstanding debt, including staff costs of British citizens in connection with Europe
6. The post-Brexit trading outlook for the UK: so far, the government have negotiated one agreement, to continue trading with the Faroe Islands (February 2019), whose population is about half that of the Isle of Wight.
7. 25% of 18-25 year olds are not on registered to vote
8. The Leave campaign has broken the law and is now being dealt with in the courts.



(Vote Leave has been fined £61,000 and referred to the police after an Electoral Commission probe said it broke electoral law. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has fined Vote Leave £40,000 for sending out nearly 200,000 unsolicited text messages.)

The evening was highly informative and entertaining. At one point, Lord Adonis, wanting to share a joke about Hell, realised that he didn't know the denomination of St Nicolas' church. Asking the question, Fr Andrew replied from the back, striking a tone of ecumenical unity: “It is the church of Jesus,” which drew an appreciative response from the audience.

The presentation certainly opened the mind of many who had lost interest due to the interminable process of Brexit. Before the talk, Fr Andrew held a Mass for the well-being of our country and the European Union which only the usual few attended. We tend to compartmentalise life, perhaps hoping it will be easier to control. Alastair Campbell famously said in a 2003 TV interview: “We don't do God,” and unintentionally summed up the default position of our society. Judging by the voting turn-outs, at least 40% of the population “don't do politics.”

And yet, everyone who has experienced the opening of the heart during Mass or the calm clarity after a quiet prayer knows the incalculable value of being open to God. Just think what could be achieved with Brexit or otherwise with both an open mind and an open heart.

