

The Future of Britain and Europe

Good morning.

Thank you very much to the Centre for European Reform for hosting us today and to Ian for that introduction.

This organisation has spent the last 21 years working for a stronger, more open and outward looking European Union so I can't think of a better place to give this speech.

I want to talk to you today about Europe. About what Europe means to me, what it means to my party and what it means to all those who believe in a democratic socialist future.

Before I begin I want to mention a conversation I had recently with Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The conversation wasn't about the specifics of Brexit – I don't mean to draw the Archbishop into this debate, I met him to discuss what our politics can learn from the remarkable success of interfaith dialogue in this country.

Something he said resonated very deeply. He told me that our politicians need to learn to 'disagree well'.

I think we all instinctively understand what he means by that.

The tone of our politics has become shrill, negative and personal in recent years. We have lost the knack of debating arguments rather than denigrating opponents.

I want that to stop - I want to play my part in making things better, and foster a more deliberative democracy that draws in many more citizens than politicians. It strikes me that citizens assemblies could play a much greater role in addressing difficult national problems.

So this speech will not attack the motives of my opponents.

I want to give a good account of my deeply held thoughts. So I will try to make the positive case for what I believe - in the hope that that case is strong enough on its own merits.

I also want to talk today about our culture. As Labour's Shadow Culture Secretary I get to spend a lot of time with inspiring young creatives - TV, Radio, artists and musicians.

They don't see British culture in isolation from European culture – and they are fearful that this country is about to jettison our deep creative partnerships that have been so productive for so many years.

Identity

For decades the European Union has been defined by the right as anti-democratic, bureaucratic and anti-British.

None of these things are true, yet the British left has not countered this narrative.

Our belief in the EU has been whispered not shouted.

It has been taken as read by generations of Labour politicians that the European Union is, at best, a necessary evil.

That it's a major trading bloc we can't afford to be outside in a globalised world. That the economic benefits make it worth putting up with the parts we don't like.

Labour is still doing it now. We talk about the evils of No Deal till we're blue in the face, because we're still scared to tell the truth about Europe.

We're more comfortable warning of an ineffable catastrophe, because we're hard-wired to be unable to say the words that I've come here this morning to say:

The European Union is not something to apologise for. It is a good thing. It is Good with a capital G.

An enduring, deep, benevolent collaboration between sovereign states unique in the history of the world.

It produced a lasting peace from the ashes of war.

It produced prosperity where there had been deprivation.

It produced transnational partnership where once there was suspicion and division.

It's not perfect, but what large institution is?

The core values of the EU are internationalism. Solidarity. Freedom.

Those are British values. And they're Labour values.

I'm a European Democratic Socialist. I don't go along with the EU despite being a socialist, I embrace the EU because I am a socialist.

Democratic Socialism is achieving common causes by the strength of collective endeavour. That's what Europe is.

We're lucky to be living through this golden age of European cooperation. We are extraordinarily fortunate to live in peace.

I am a democratic socialist, a British patriot and a proud European. These are not identities that rub awkwardly up against one another - they are mutually reinforcing.

Europe is who we are and have been for centuries.

Yet for decades we've failed to challenge a narrative that – somehow – our “way of life” is under threat. It's simply not true. At all. Yet we've heard it so often that it's come to seem real.

To our European neighbours it seems bizarre. Do the French feel any less French because they're part of the EU? And unlike the UK, also part of Schengen such that they effectively have no internal European borders.

Has that undermined their sense of identity or their way of life? Have you been to France recently? Because I can tell you that it hasn't. The French are as French as they have always been and always will be. From Dunkirk to the Dordogne they're still 200% French over there, believe me.

Nor have the Germans come to seem just like the Irish, or the Italians become indistinguishable from the Danes. Europe's languages, culture and identities have not been homogenised by a centralising bureaucratic behemoth, and never will. Why would they?

The institutions of the EU formalise - and democratise – the natural bonds between us. We are not diminished by our membership of the EU. We are recognised, enhanced and empowered by it.

Probably the most important Englishman who ever lived was William Shakespeare. A man of the Midlands, like me, whose transcendent imagination was as broadly and deeply European as it was English.

As Professor Michael Dobson, Director of the Shakespeare Institute, told the British Council in Paris in 2016:

Shakespeare was a product of the European Renaissance, and he grew up in the knowledge that the territory in which he lived had originally been Britannia, a mere province of something much larger and more significant, the Roman empire. I have written elsewhere about how misleading it can be to think of Shakespeare as modern Britain's national poet. I would add that it is even more misleading to suggest that Shakespeare thought of Britain as anything other than part of a larger geopolitical entity called Europe.

One only needs look at where the plays took place: Rome, Athens, Venice, Padua, Milan, Cyprus, Navarra, Messina, Vienna, Denmark, the Balkans, Sicily. And he wasn't just using places he'd visited as handy material. He never left the UK.

He conceived and realised these settings because being European was central to his sense of who he was, and what it meant to be English.

Erasmus and Plutarch loomed as large in his imagination as did Chaucer and Sidney.

Mediaeval London was a bustling melting pot of migrants from all over the world. The greatest Englishman, 400 years ago, was wholly, deeply European.

And it was so for centuries before Shakespeare too, until very recently. Did French kings not become English kings, who became British kings? And did not Dutch and German Kings and Queens do the same? Did the Windsors not change their name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha?

And did we not a few days ago commemorate D Day, when British soldiers crossed that tiny strip of sea to liberate our ancient neighbour from occupation? Only 75 years ago, our finest young men marched off to war to save France. Yes, to save Britain too. But you couldn't save Britain without saving France. The fates of our two nations were indivisible.

This is a truth that Churchill understood.

A great war leader but also a great builder of peace. Churchill was a founding father of the EU just as surely as Adenauer, de Gasperi and Schumann. He conceived of it, he pressed for it, he understood both how vital it was to preventing war and how transformational it could be as an engine of prosperity and partnership.

Britain's place is in the EU because Britain is by definition in and of Europe.

Look at our great cities like London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leicester - among the most super-diverse in the world.

That is what and who we are. Yes, old ladies cycling to church in the mist; that too.

But also a great, historic European nation, still at the zenith of innovation and creativity, attracting all kinds of people, for all kinds of reasons, from all over the world.

Yes, it's the nation of Shakespeare and Byron, who died fighting for Greece in their war of independence, and Mary Shelley who conceived of *Frankenstein* in Geneva, and Charlotte Bronte, whose novel *Villette* was based on her time teaching at a Brussels school and Keats, whose life and death in Rome is celebrated at the foot of the Spanish steps.

And of course of John Dryden, not just a great writer of English drama, but a great lover and student of French drama, and a translator of Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Boccaccio – the great canon of *European* classical literature that was the base of everything these English geniuses knew.

Dryden who also once wrote the great lines, by the way:

A man so various that he seemed to be

Not one but all mankind's epitome

Which keeps coming into my head in these Tory leadership days, for some reason.

Yes, this is the Britain of Sir Simon Rattle, who made his name in Birmingham and then spent 16 years conducting the Berlin Philharmonic;

But it's also today's Britain, the people's Britain, with four football teams contesting Europe's two finals, represented by players from all over Europe and all over the world.

It's Raheem Sterling's Britain.

Shane Meadows' and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's Britain (they're making a *Fleabag* in France now by the way). Malorie Blackman and Steve McQueen and Idris Elba's Britain.

Sadiq Khan and Sajid Javid's Britain

This is our beautiful place in all its glory. It's who we really are now. That's the country I'm so proud of. Not anybody else's nostalgic fantasy of how it used to be. And my Britain is utterly indivisible from Europe, which now and in the future entails growing with its institutions.

Our relationship with Europe is about far more than economics, and far more than political cooperation.

It's about what kind of country we are.

What we want for our children.

The scale and the scope of the horizons we can offer them.

What we're able to bring them up to be.

And the kind of country we are is European. It is a fundamental part of our national identity, our culture, our history. Britishness is not distinct from Europeanness.

These are not warring identities competing for space. To be British is to be European.

Social Democracy

Now, I know that not everyone wears as easily that deep attachment of identity.

In fact some people have begun to use identity as a stick to beat pro-Europeans, equating support for Europe with class. I don't think that's right or helpful. The majority of Labour people are supportive of Europe – and that support is not dictated by social class.

There are powerful rational arguments for membership of the European Union as well as emotional ones.

For social democrats who want to make life better for our poorest communities and secure economic growth that can be fairly shared the best way forward is within Europe.

Almost every aspect of life outside of Europe will be more difficult, more expensive and less safe. Travel, communications, trade, manufacturing. Our national security. I don't think people realise just how far back in time we'd be taken by leaving the EU.

And Europe has been so important to our proud towns as well as our great cities. Let us not forget that in the dark days following the pit closures under Thatcher and Major, the only support those coalfield areas had was Objective One funding.

It became the only hope - a lifeline for so many traditional Labour areas and working class communities.

And in the same way at the same time, faced with a Tory Government that was attacking workers' rights, socialists in Britain looked to the EU as an institution that was way ahead of the UK in terms of protecting working people, consumers, and environmentalists.

For those on the left to fail to acknowledge that is to re-write history.

I used to lead delegations of union shop stewards to Brussels when I worked for the AEEU - now Unite- in the 1990s. We'd lobby for support for investment in the car industry. Our stewards would share their experiences of the globalised world with other workers across the continent. We'd form alliances to challenge the excesses of global capital.

The European Union has been a steadfast ally in furthering the rights and welfare of working people.

From the European Convention on Human Rights to the Working Time Directive to the agenda for the next Commission, on pan-European minimum wages and tackling global tax avoidance. The EU has been a friend to workers here and across the continent.

It is no 'boss's club', it is both an engine of progress and a backstop against regressive and repressive governments.

Labour, quite rightly, has just declared a climate emergency. But climate change doesn't stop at our borders, and we can't tackle it alone. We are so much stronger in Europe.

And as the global economy changes - as automation, AI and the rise of the global mega corporations change capitalism once again - there is strength in numbers and might in unity.

Britain alone will struggle to face down the barons of surveillance capitalism - to take on the shoddy practices, tax avoidance and employee abuse of global giants like Facebook, Amazon and Google.

Together we created the strongest consumer privacy law anywhere in the world. Together we can go further still - breaking up monopolies, shutting out malpractice, facing down tax avoidance. On our own, we are vulnerable.

We can see this pernicious process in action already, before Brexit has even happened.

Inward investment has fallen these last three years whilst it has grown on the Continent.

Our car industry is collapsing around us. Manufacturing jobs are down.

Membership of the EU brings a 2% a year boost to our GDP, according to the Bank of England.

That might sound like numbers in the margin but it isn't just numbers to me. It is £20 billion a year in extra taxes to pay our nurses properly, to invest in our schools, to give our elderly the care they need and deserve.

These things matter to anyone who calls themselves a democratic socialist. These things matter to me.

Whether you are a European romantic, proud of Britain as a modern, European country or a hard pragmatist who knows that every penny counts when it comes to supporting working people, the European Union is your friend. And so that is the case that I want to make. That is the case that I want Labour to make.

Brexit is not a brake on Labour values. It is an existential threat to them.

The European Union is the fruit of our forefathers' sacrifice. It is peace forged from the ravages of war.

It is prosperity shared, workers protected, oligopoly challenged.

It is a natural extension of our patriotism and the natural result of our history.

European is who we are and who we have always been.

Our members are remain. Our values are remain. Our hearts are remain.

We need our Labour Party to be true to who we are and be loud and proud in support of Europe.

What we need to do

So where does that leave us?

We are a country going round in circles, kidding ourselves that one last heave will somehow resolve the contradictions and the catastrophes that Brexit both embodies and invites.

And in the meantime, the people of Britain are ignored. The burning injustices rage hotter and brighter than ever. And the machinery of government, stuck in the Brexit mud, simply cannot deliver the things that we need.

The NHS is in crisis. Young people wait in vain for houses to be built and for their schools to be resourced. Our elderly do not get the care they need and our poorest are trapped in the nightmare of universal credit. While our politics fixates on Brexit, Britain is left to rot.

The only tool available to actually break this deadlock - we all know, even if we have not admitted it yet - is a public vote.

We put the question back to the people because parliament and government – as we reach the three year mark – have proved utterly incapable of implementing Brexit, and shows no more sign of doing so now than ever.

The notion that it's in some way undemocratic to let the people put an end to this crisis because, after three years, parliament and government cannot, is absurd.

And if you want Brexit, and you believe there is still a majority for it in the UK, then a public vote will break the deadlock and deliver the Brexit you want.

Whereas if many people have changed their minds and no longer want Brexit now that they have more information about what it means, how is it undemocratic to give them the chance to express that three years on and with the country in limbo?

Labour is the party of democracy - so we must ask the people.

We are the party of socialism - so we must campaign for Europe.

Proud socialists. Proud Britons. Proud Europeans.

Our future doesn't need to be Brexit.

So now is the time to speak out more loudly than ever, before any further irreparable damage is done.

Only a public vote can break this deadlock, but we will only achieve this if Labour fights for it and champions it. We must do that – in Parliament and around the country. Labour must make the positive case.

And only by remaining in the EU can we remain the same Britain at heart that we've been for 1000 years.

If we leave, we become less than we were and less than our children have a right to expect.

The patriotic choice is to remain.