

Rethinking the UK-EU Relationship in Post-Brexit Britain

Article by Beatrice White

November 27, 2020

Over four years since the controversial Brexit referendum, the prospect of a no-deal exit from the EU seems increasingly likely for the UK. Amid this uncertainty, the Green Party of England and Wales must adopt a clear position on the future UK-EU relationship, tackling key questions about the role of the UK in today's world. While the challenges of operating as a small party in a Conservative-dominated political landscape cannot be underestimated, opportunities also emerge to strengthen old collaborations and build new ones with allies across Europe.

With the end of the transition period fast approaching, time is running out for Britain and the EU to ratify a Brexit deal. The European Parliament has announced plans to hold an additional plenary between Christmas and New Year, to have chance to vote on a potential deal which has still failed to materialise as deadlines pass one after the other. A no-deal exit for the United Kingdom seems increasingly likely, thanks to the rhetoric and actions of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Conservative Government, despite the continued attempts of Members of Parliament to take this option off the table.

In this context, it might seem surprising that Brexit was not a topic high on the agenda at the Autumn Conference of the Green Party of England and Wales, which took place online in October, particularly given the impact that a deal, or lack thereof, will have on a wide range of areas from trade and the economy to fisheries and the future of the UK as a union. Prominent party members attributed the EU's absence from the proceedings to logistical constraints, the salience of current events such as Covid-19, and the debate around systemic racism, as well as a generalised fatigue with the protracted leaving process.

At the conference, former Member of the European Parliament and economist Molly Scott Cato was the main proposer of a motion in favour of the UK remaining in the single market. Although it was not debated or voted upon due to lack of time, there were indications that the motion was supported by a significant majority. This seems representative of the party membership's views more broadly, in line with the pro-EU stance evidenced by the party's strong support for remaining in the EU and subsequent campaigning for a People's Vote. The motion is expected to be confirmed at the party's Spring Conference. Not long after the conference and with negotiation deadlines looming, the party put out a press release calling for a commitment to a close relationship with the EU, in the form of continued membership of the customs union and single market, as well as the maintaining of rights to free movement.

“Greens need to take a clear position on the extent to which we want to be multilateral, given the world as it is at the moment” – Jean Lambert

However, the existence of a consensus around this position is disputed by some within the party such as Jenny

Jones, a Green member of the UK House of Lords, who was one of the key figures advocating to leave the EU. Jones argues that a debate is necessary, and this position cannot be taken as party policy until that happens. The party's most recent agreed policy in this area, which dates from October 2016 (several months after the Brexit referendum), "restates its belief that our future is best served by staying as close as possible to the European Union while seeking improvements where we have long been critical of EU policy". However, it stops short of asserting that the UK's place is inside the EU. Scott Cato admits that "we need to completely revise our policy on the EU – this process is just starting out now, and it will take some time. We do need to establish a clearer position." Exactly how that position is to be reached remains an open question.

Evolving unions

Jean Lambert, former MEP and current member of the European Green Party's executive committee, views the continued debate around the single market as a symptom of contrasting views over where the balance between self-sufficiency and international trade should lie. This taps into broader questions around global governance. Lambert admits foreign policy has not been the Green Party of England and Wales' strong point, and that it has generally been limited to reactions to various crises and conflicts occurring around the world. "We're still unsure about where we see ourselves. In the past we've been hostile to large international bodies such as the EU, NATO and the WTO... but when you see what happens with bilateral deals, you begin to reconsider. Greens need to take a clear position on the extent to which we want to be multilateral, given the world as it is at the moment."

Even if there is still thinking to be done in these areas, there is no denying the party has come a long way – a journey which has been shared by many of its individual members. "Twenty years ago, we were a very anti-Europe party, and we've moved," says Scott Cato. "I've changed my mind – but some people still haven't. There is a significant minority who think the EU is a corporate beast, too large and too distant, whereas the majority feel that we are using Europe to drive higher standards."

The challenge of developing a strengthened foreign policy is complicated by the presence of multiple legislatures among the nations that make up the UK – and the potential for these arrangements to change further in the future. While foreign policy is generally made at a UK level, this creates some complexity to be navigated for a party such as the Green Party of England and Wales, which is separate from its Scottish and Northern Irish counterparts. This question has become even more salient since the onset of the pandemic, which has seen much stronger roles being played by the devolved administrations, Lambert explains. In her view, this is likely "to get people thinking about whether this is the way to move forward," particularly in light of the confusion around the status of Northern Ireland.

An unlikely bastion of resistance

The Northern Irish conundrum has been at the centre of the recent debacle surrounding the UK Government's plans for the end of the transition period. The proposed Internal Markets Bill, designed to override the Withdrawal Agreement regarding the movement of goods between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, has caused consternation for breaking the terms of the previous agreement and thereby flouting international law. The main force resisting this has not been the opposition Labour Party, however, but rather the House of Lords, where members have sought to heavily amend the bill, thwarting its smooth passage into law.

Scott Cato, who was recently elected to be the next Green in line to join the House of Lords, argues that, given how the "House of Commons has now been taken over by an antidemocratic faction of the Tory [Conservative] Party with delusions about a global Brexit," and the lack of a functional opposition from Labour, "the alternative is incredibly weakened. The House of Lords' power is diminished by the fact that it is not democratic, but it does have a particular role defending the constitution." Scott Cato hopes that the House of Lords could act as a

counterweight to the government, defending the single market and freedom of movement.

*Brexit may have lost the UK its power and influence over
EU laws, but many other relationships and forms of
collaboration will continue.*

These views echo those of the party's former leader and its second member of the Lords, Natalie Bennett. Reflecting on her first year in the House of Lords in October 2020, Bennett wrote: "One surprising development in a year of turmoil is that this unelected body, created through a mixture of 18th-century style patronage and medieval inheritance law, is now the most representative House, and the centre of resistance to an out-of-control, far-right, undemocratic government." Bennett has also argued that in the House of Lords Labour will need to enlist the help of members from smaller parties in order to vote against the "disastrous legal breaches" contained in the bill.

In the UK's first-past-the-post voting system, it is a struggle for small parties to be heard on any issue. "Greens have become the voice championing what the EU has to offer, whether that's upholding standards through the Agriculture Bill or defending freedom of movement for young people, but the space we have in the media and our power to make change is incredibly limited," says Scott Cato. "This points to the need for electoral reform, and more and more people are recognising that."

Losing a seat at the table

For a small party with only one Member of Parliament and two in the House of Lords, the loss of seven MEPs was significant in terms of the party's capacity to shape legislation. "This will leave something of a void," says Lambert. "It will require more effort from both EU bodies and us about how to stay engaged – so we need to start thinking now about how we intend to keep relations with European-level Green actors. The openness is there – but how do you make that operational?" This willingness to form a special relationship with the UK is demonstrated by initiatives such as the EU-UK Friendship Group, established by MEPs including the German Green Terry Reintke, to keep close ties with the UK after Brexit.

Sam Murray, an outgoing member of the Green Party of England and Wales's international committee, has worked to promote engagement with European networks such as the European Green Party and the Federation of Young European Greens. Greens in England and Wales are "often very focused on local issues and that is commonly their route into the party," he explains. "Often these issues seem more immediate, so it is not always easy to get people to see the relevance and benefit of those European-level connections and links." For Murray, the pan-European campaigning that took place around the European elections provided a key rallying point for cooperation and will be difficult to compensate for.

Brexit may have lost the UK its power and influence over EU laws, but many other relationships and forms of collaboration will continue, as Scott Cato points out: "Business relationships and professional organisations will carry on. Energy policy and climate policy are interconnected so we will still be involved with those cross-Europe organisations, but won't be setting standards or rules anymore. This is why Brexit was so absurd."

Beyond Brexit: rejoin or refocus?

With all the options for preventing Brexit now exhausted, the pro-European focus has turned to avoiding a "hard" no-deal exit. Once that matter is settled, however, much broader questions open up about which objectives to

pursue in the longer term. Will it mean making the case for re-joining the EU, or seeking to reinvent the partnership through new forms of cooperation? What happens next year after the transition period ends is likely to impact popular opinion about Brexit and the way it has been handled, which may determine whether or not the dividing line of Leave vs. Remain becomes entrenched as a political cleavage.

Scott Cato believes difficult times lie ahead and lessons will have to be learned the hard way as the disorder and disruption forecast by the Remain side sets in: “The task for those of us who think we should re-join is to draw attention to everything we’ve lost. We have to go through the pain of Brexit now – the propaganda was so powerful it overcame rational arguments – so people will have to learn by experience as everything comes home to roost. The question is how rapidly things fall apart, how painful it is, and how much the government lies about the causes – all of that is quite unpredictable.” She expects the impulse to remain close to and potentially re-join the EU will come from younger people: “If we keep the door open, it’ll be the younger people that will bring us back. Brexit is a delusion of the elderly to a large extent.”

With local elections coming up next year, Green candidates and campaigners will have strategic choices to make about whether and how to make the EU part of the conversation.

This generational divide is also present within the Greens. Young members like Murray embody a shift – he is part of a cohort that feels a deep connection with the EU, one that underpins their own sense of identity, and would like to see a relationship that is “deeper than a financial trading relationship – more of an emotional relationship, with connections across borders and cultures.” This sense of proximity can be seen in the way that “activists have taken to heart and followed the successes of other Green parties in Europe such as the French Greens at the local elections,” he explains. “We still see ourselves as a family.”

Lambert believes the local level could be key to maintaining strong ties on the ground. “We need to make sure the UK is knitted into city networks such as Eurocities and C40, as well as twinning or informal initiatives and the Green network of local councillors.” In her view, seeking out new networks may have some merit, but it should not be regarded as a substitute for nurturing and maintaining pre-existing ties. “Given the enormous influence of the EU on the international stage, it’s in our interest to stay close to that. Not investing in the networks we already have, which we helped to set up, would be a big mistake. It’s in our mutual interest to keep those relationships close.”

Murray echoes this view: “We can build new alliances – but as additions, not replacements for relationships with EU countries.” He is, however, positive about thinking of other forms of international cooperation, such as “strengthening alliances with non-EU countries and the inter-isles network.” According to Murray, this provides an opportunity “to have conversations we never had, with countries such as Switzerland and Norway, or pre-accession countries, that are also part of the European Greens, to see which issues we have in common to work on. It has been something of a wake-up call, making us ask ourselves why we haven’t been talking to these countries until now, and it has made us recognise that we’ve possibly been too Eurocentric in our approach to date. Many of our problems are global, so it is about supporting one another and showing solidarity.”

Whether such efforts to open new channels of communication and sustain existing ones will be prioritised remains to be seen. The People’s Vote campaign built up considerable political momentum, as did campaigns during the referendum with a “remain but reform” message, such as Another Europe is Possible. Nevertheless, the question of how to sustain and harness this is not an easy one, particularly in a demoralising Conservative-dominated political landscape. With local elections coming up next year, Green candidates and campaigners will have strategic choices

to make about whether and how to make the EU part of the conversation. For a party that has generally been strongest and most at ease on local issues, making an unequivocal case for the relevance and importance of what happens elsewhere in the world to the everyday lives of constituents is a challenge, particularly outside of London, which has a undeniable need for an internationalist outlook for its survival. Practical cooperation mechanisms such as networks of cities will help in this regard, but building a narrative that makes the connections between the various levels of governance will require reflection, debate, and some big ideas.



Beatrice White is the Deputy Editor of the Green European Journal. She has previously worked for a daily newspaper in Istanbul, Turkey, and in the UK House of Lords. She is a member of the Green Party of England and Wales and sits on its International Committee.

Published November 27, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/rethinking-the-uk-eu-relationship-in-post-brexit-britain/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.