

# Better IN for our Food

## Discussion summary



In this Nourish Scotland event on 25th May 2016, five contributors explained their reasons for campaigning for the UK to stay in the European Union, and then engaged in lively discussions with the attendees.

- Alyn Smith, Member of the European Parliament
- Adam Ramsay, co-editor of Open Democracy
- Heather Anderson, organic farmer and campaigner for a better food system
- Alex Robb, president of SRUC Student Association
- Daphne Vlastari, Advocacy Officer, Scottish Environment LINK

This document summarises the discussions and the arguments that were brought forward at the event. Nourish is publishing this to help our members, supporters, and anyone interested in our work to spread informed and positive messages about the European Union and Britain's place in it.

## Sharing a positive message

### 1. The environmental case

EU environmental regulation has helped improve the environmental footprint of European industries. Regulations such as **energy efficiency standards** are not cumbersome red tape; they *benefit all of us*. Alyn reminded us of the importance of getting this point across to counter the Conservatives' narrative of 'EU regulation as a burden on our economy'. Furthermore the EU has pushed standards up *globally* thanks to the formidable economic weight of the European single market. This means the EU can gradually tighten regulation without putting our industry at a competitive disadvantage - which is something the UK could not achieve on its own.

Other types of environmental regulations brought up by Daphne are the EU **air and water quality directives** and the **nature protection directives**. Tangible benefits of these pieces of legislation to Scotland include the strong protection of charismatic Scottish species - such as bat, dolphin, porpoise, wildcat, and turtle species to only name a few 'European protected species' - and of traditional peat lands and other habitats via Natura 2000 sites or through the Ramsar convention; or indeed Portobello beach as one of the numerous beaches that have become clean thanks to the EU.

The EU doesn't only set rules; it also helps Member States through co-financing. The European Commission **funds environmental projects** across Europe through the LIFE programme - for example up to £23M was provided in January 2016 to help the UK implement River Basin Management Plans which should help to improve water quality and prevent flooding<sup>1</sup>.

On a more fundamental level, Daphne and Heather highlighted that the **precautionary principle** is one of the greatest protections that the EU provides to our environment. It means that new technologies and products are only allowed if there is considerable evidence that they are harmless to human and environmental health, as opposed to the US where there needs to be unequivocal evidence that something is harmful for it to be banned. The precautionary principle is enshrined into EU law and guides EU legislation and in the case of food and agriculture GMOs are the most famous example.

### 2. Freedom of movement and intra-EU migration

2.6 million EU citizens reside in the UK. Alyn quoted a figure from the Wee Bleu Book: EU citizens living in the UK contribute £55 per second to the UK economy<sup>2</sup>. Note that this is a net figure, *i.e.* their total

<sup>1</sup> Source from the Wee Bleu Book: EU LIFE Programme website

<sup>2</sup> Source from the Wee Bleu Book: Christian Dustmann and Tommaso Frattini, 'The Fiscal Effects of Immigration to the UK', University College London: Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration, no. 22/13 November 2014

contribution (through taxes and consumption) minus their "cost" in public services (NHS, education, or welfare benefits).

173,000 EU citizens have made their home in Scotland, which is around 3.3% of the overall population. These "non-UK EU-born Scottish residents" have a higher employment rate (70%) than the Scottish average (58%)<sup>3</sup>.

1.2 million UK citizens reside outside Britain in the EU<sup>4</sup>.

But it's about more than digits. Alex emphasised that freedom of movement in the EU provides immense **opportunities for young people**. British people can go to study or gain work experience abroad very easily. In the same way, large numbers of EU citizens studying or working in the UK result in enriched, multicultural student bodies and work environments. The EU facilitates this via its rules for the free movement of people and through the Erasmus+ Programme which funds study and work experiences in other European countries. Further, there are also **opportunities for all**; the rules for the free movement of people make it easy for anyone to go and live in another EU country. Britons of all ages benefit hugely from this: from students to young families to retirees.

As a result, Europe and the UK have become rich multicultural places where knowledge and ideas move freely and friendships cross borders like never before. Multiculturalism and living abroad are no longer only for the elite; everyone can have a taste of it. Adam told us that this, for him, is the most important reason of all for which the UK should remain in the EU.

### 3. Rights for all

Social rights, *i.e.* **workers' rights and consumers' rights**, were mentioned as another gain from EU membership. The EU has of course not invented those rights, but it has improved and championed them. British consumers benefit from the same basic legal rights when making purchases anywhere in the EU. Workers have seen their quality of life improved by the EU working-time directive and directives introducing a framework to improve health and safety measures for employees<sup>5</sup>.

### 4. A reformed EU for the future

It is striking that the Remain campaign has been mostly silent on the vision it has for the EU of the future. Everybody agrees that the EU is not perfect, but then how can we rally people for the EU without a vision for a better EU?

Alyn said "We need a new mission statement for the European Union. The single market is pretty much realised now and the EU needs to define its mission for the 21st century. Tackling climate change, developing social Europe, and embracing multiculturalism should be at the heart of this new mission." Many share this view in other European countries and in Brussels. Alyn quoted German MEPs, for example, as talking of "EU 2.0".

The EU has achieved what it was created for. It has secured peace in Europe and has become the largest single market. It has now the political clout to be a progressive force in the world on issues such as environmental sustainability or human rights (and it already has used that influence to champion ambitious international action on climate change for example).

## Facing down criticism

### 1. On how democratic the EU actually is

The EU is not a super-state; in almost all policy fields the EU touches upon, it acts merely as a platform for European countries to work together on common issues. There is very little "the EU" or "Brussels bureaucrats" can do autonomously, without the consent of European governments or of the European Parliament. The Commission can be pushy in bringing its proposals forward, but ultimately the decisions are nearly always made by elected politicians in the Council of Ministers in conjunction with the European Parliament.

---

<sup>3</sup> Source: 'The Impact of EU membership in Scotland', *SPICE*, October 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Source: 'Migration Statistics', *House of Commons Research Paper*, no.SN06077, February 2016

<sup>5</sup> Source: [http://www.scotlandineurope.eu/employment\\_rights](http://www.scotlandineurope.eu/employment_rights)

Who are those politicians? In the Council the 28 Ministers of the relevant matter represent the governments of the 28 Member States. In the European Parliament 751 MEPs represent the EU citizens who elected them directly; British citizens have 73 MEPs.

In terms of representative democracy, the EU is as democratic as it can be. The real issue lies with public participation, scrutiny, and accountability; and for that, the blame lies with ourselves, our media and our elected politicians. Ourselves, because citizens' interest in EU politics and policies, and their willingness to engage with it are prerequisites for democratic legitimacy, but are critically lacking. Our media and politicians, because their failure to communicate 'EU stuff' to the general public contributes to citizens' lack of interest and to misconceptions of the EU.

## **2. On TTIP and neoliberalism**

Should we leave the EU to stop TTIP being forced on us? The consensus at the event was that this is not the way forward. First, Alyn assured us that TTIP negotiations are at a total stalemate and likely to fail altogether. In addition to the overwhelming opposition from public opinion, various Member States' governments spoke against TTIP as a result of the recent leaks. Second, were the negotiations to continue, the UK will be affected by TTIP whether it is in or out of the EU because of its close trading relationship with EU countries – especially so for agricultural products. The only way we can influence the outcome of the negotiations is from within the EU. Finally, all contributors agreed that thinking that leaving the EU will safeguard us from trade and investment partnerships such as TTIP is a delusion. The Conservative UK government is one of the strongest advocates of TTIP and will be quick to sign similar treaties when freed from its Membership of the EU.

However, critics argue that TTIP is only a 'symptom', and that the real issue is the capitalist, neoliberal agenda of the EU. While that may be true, it is important to look at where that agenda comes from. Politics in Brussels reflect the politics in the 28 Member States, and especially in the major countries: France, Germany, the UK. Daphne also pointed out that while some institutions and departments are overtly neoliberal (eg. the European Central Bank, or the Directorate General (DG) for Trade in the European Commission), others are more socially and environmentally progressive (e.g. Much of the European Parliament, or DG Environment). Participants agreed that leaving the EU is not a solution. The best way to promote a socially and environmentally just agenda will be to build up the movement for social and environmental justice in the UK and link up with well-established progressive movements across the EU.

Finally, the attempts of the EU to re-regulate the banking sector and to fight tax evasion speak in its favour. The UK's track record with these issues is rather poor, both in its reluctant contribution to EU's efforts and in its individual action – or lack of it. Furthermore, in this globalised world, no country can address these challenges on its own.

## **3. On the CAP**

The CAP can seem difficult to defend against criticism because it is often being criticized by farmers and wider society and has a reputation for bureaucratic overload and payment systems that favour large agri-businesses. However, two responses come to mind. First, had the UK not joined the EU, it is highly doubtful that any support for farmers would be left after the waves of austerity and privatisation of the last decades. The same point can be made about the future of agricultural policy in a Brexit scenario. The lack of public support for small and/or organic farmers means the UK farming sector would almost certainly be even more industrial and intensive than it already is. Second, the CAP is a work in progress. It achieved its initial aim of securing food supplies in Europe, but new challenges have arisen and the CAP is gradually being reformed to address them. Discussions have started<sup>6</sup> at ministerial level in Europe about the future of the CAP. Addressing climate change is high on the agenda, and the question has been raised whether the CAP should become a Food & Farming Policy, which opens the door to a more holistic approach to farming policy – one that includes public health and addresses the issue of fair food chains, for example.

In short, the CAP is not all that bad compared to the likely alternative, and we have a critical role to play in the next reform to make it fairer, more sustainable, and more effective.

---

<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://www.independent.ie/business/farming/brussels-briefing-dutch-up-the-ante-on-cap-negotiations-34759389.html>