

The EESC bids farewell to its British members with the promise of maintaining close ties with UK civil society



The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) paid tribute to its British members on 22 January 2020 at the last plenary session they will attend before the UK leaves the EU on 31 January. The 24 members representing the United Kingdom received a commemorative medal in a ceremony that showed the EESC's commitment to maintaining strong ties with British civil society after Brexit.

On 31 January 2020, the United Kingdom will officially leave the European Union after 47 years of membership, meaning that its representatives will no longer be present in the EU institutions. The EESC officially said goodbye to its British members, who will already be absent at the February plenary session, in a touching ceremony where many personal feelings surfaced.

Luca Jahier, president of the EESC, admitted that the choice made by British citizens to leave the EU was *a decision of historical importance that we deeply regret, but that we have to accept and respect*. Mr Jahier spoke of the crucial contribution made by British members to the work of the EESC in many fields and said that *the UK's departure will force us to rethink the way in which we communicate with our citizens, so that they can relate in their everyday life to Europe's tangible and verifiable achievements*.

Nevertheless, the president of the EESC insisted on the EESC's determination to maintain close contacts with British civil society after Brexit: *There is no other alternative than a strong relationship between the EU and the UK, and we at the EESC will do whatever it takes to keep that strong link alive. Ceci n'est qu'un au revoir, mes amis*.

Tom Jenkins, president of the EESC between 1996 and 1998, was invited to the ceremony and expressed his sorrow for being about to lose his EU citizenship. He also claimed for the establishment of an Economic and Social Committee in the UK and asked British parties *to encourage dialogue with civil society representatives*.

The pro-European activist **Madeleinea Key**, also known as "EU Supergirl", also took part in the ceremony representing the "remainers", the British citizens who voted for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union in the 2016 referendum. She criticized the mix of apathy and ignorance that have fuelled the rise nationalism in the UK and warned EU leaders about the need to change the way they communicate to citizens. Kay announced that she will continue to fight for Europe in the UK and concluded: *We must believe that the future is Europe, so all British citizens know they will be forever Europeans*.

The voice of the groups and the way forward

Three British members representing each of the three groups of the EESC took the floor to express their personal feelings and views on Brexit. **David Sears** (Employers Group) recalled his first visit to Brussels in 1958 and insisted on the need to involve and listen to young people and *to bring the whole of civil society into the social decision-making process.*

Judy McKnight (Workers Group) mentioned the need for an equivalent of the EESC at the UK level. She also reiterated that *when we cease to be members of the EU, we will not cease to be Europeans, we will not cease to care about European civil society, and we will not cease to play our part in resisting all policies that seek to diminish the rights and well-being of EU and UK citizens.*

Representing the Diversity Europe Group, **Jane Morrice** expressed her concern about the consequences of Brexit in Northern Ireland and outlined that *this will not be a divorce, just a separation agreement giving us time before we get back together.*

Rose D'Sa, also member of the Diversity Europe Group, spoke as the longest UK serving member to ask the EU to examine its own conscience, as in her opinion the Lisbon Treaty must be revised. *In the meantime the EU has lost the UK, which is a catastrophe. Was it worth?,* she asked.

The presidents of the three groups also contributed to the debate by acknowledging the work of the British members. **Jacek Krawczyk**, president of the Employers Group, stressed the need to *find the way to work on a future that will connect us as business people and as friends.* For the Workers Group, **Oliver Röpke** insisted on the need to keep strong ties with British civil society: *We must protect the economic, social and political ties developed over half a century of UK membership of the EU. The links between civil society in the UK and the rest of the EU will remain strong.* **Arno Metzler**, president of the Diversity Europe Group, expressed his gratitude for the work done by British members.

Stefano Mallia, president of the EESC's Brexit Follow-up Group, closed the debate referring to the dangers of Brexit in places like Scotland or Northern Ireland and mentioned communication as *the best tool to fight apathy and ignorance.* He also insisted on the need of setting up some kind of forum to keep alive the dialogue with British civil society: *We must fight to keep our friendship and I will do my best to build a structure that allows it.*