

## Richard Corbett: Brexit talks are chaotic and catastrophic

Written by Rajnish Singh on 11 September 2018 in Interviews  
Interviews

Veteran MEP and leader of Parliament's UK Labour party grouping Richard Corbett explains why Brexit may not even happen.



Richard Corbett | *Photo credit: Giancarlo Rocconi*

---

With time fast running out for the UK to reach an agreement with the EU, Richard Corbett describes the current state of the negotiations as “chaotic and catastrophic.” The UK deputy, who was first elected to the Parliament in 1996, has been a long-standing, passionate supporter of the EU.

He campaigned in the UK’s 1975 referendum when still a student at Oxford University, and was one of the first politicians to recognise the importance of taking on Ukip, by highlighting in 2004 the links in his constituency, of Yorkshire and Humber, between the Eurosceptic party candidates and the far-right British National Party.

Although he was not re-elected for the 2009-2014 Parliament, he still played an important role in EU politics, as an advisor to former Council President Herman Van Rompuy during the global financial and Greek economic crisis while it was its worst.

---

## RELATED CONTENT

- [Ilhan Kyuchyuk: What is lacking in Brexit talks is what the British are normally known for, pragmatism and sure-footed diplomacy](#) [1]
  - [Mariya Gabriel: The future of Europe and of the world is inevitably digital](#) [2]
  - [Miriam Dalli: We need more ambitious CO2 reduction targets to ensure EU does not endanger its technological leadership](#) [3]
  - [Adina-Ioana Vălean: The simple fact that the Commission proposed the circular economy package is already a change in mindset](#) [4]
- 

Corbett admits he was filled with “shock and horror” when the result of the referendum was announced on 24 June 2016. “The result was not good for Britain. The wrong course of action was taken.”

He insists, “The campaign had been won by the Leave side by a narrow victory, based on a pack of lies. I was very disappointed.”

Two years later, when asked about the progress of the negotiations, he doesn’t mince his words. “The prospect of any kind of Brexit deal that bears any resemblance whatsoever to what was promised by the Leave campaign and the Brexit supporting ministers at the start of the negotiations is pretty much zero.”

Even if UK Prime Minister Theresa May can achieve a deal with the EU, Corbett doubts that it will be supported domestically. “We’re going to be confronted with a deal - assuming there is a deal - that will seriously disappoint not only Remain voters, but also Leave voters. People will be entitled to say, ‘Wait a minute, this isn’t what I was told, that’s not what we were promised. And it’s damn well not what I voted for’.”

Blame for the current uncertainty in the negotiations lies solely, he says, with the Conservative government; “The government is riven down the middle.” The choices on offer are stark.

“Either a Brexit that means distancing yourself completely from the EU, outside the single market, the customs union, security corporation and so on, in which case it will hit the British economy hard. Or, do you try to reduce the risk by staying inside the single market and customs union, in which case you become a rule-taker without having a say on those rules and laws because you’re not a member? It’s a rather unpalatable choice. Either way, it’s not going to be very good for Britain.”

Further complicating the situation, “the government is torn, with the neo-liberal and ultra-nationalist right, both wanting to distance Britain from Europe for purely ideological reasons, no matter the price paid. It is a dire situation.”

However, Corbett believes the EU’s reaction so far has been “positive” to the Chequers White Paper, which outlines the UK’s negotiating position. “They have been trying to be as polite as possible.”

The biggest weakness with the document is that it is separating goods and services, with services

excluded from the single market.

“That’s not good for Britain, as services make up 80 per cent of the UK economy and it affects manufactured goods as well. Often, goods and services are linked: for example, just look at mobile phones or jet engines. Yet it also amounts to saying to the EU, ‘Sorry, we’re leaving. Could you now change your rules to accommodate us?’ It is proposing a formula on customs arrangements that the rest of Europe and indeed, many in Britain, believe it is totally unworkable.”

He also points out that no answer has been provided for the question of what happens to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland - ostensibly the border between the EU and the UK.

“Everybody is waiting to find out how you could turn that frontier into a customs border, as the British government intends and not have customs controls. How do you do that?”

He believes to reach any agreement on the border issue will be politically very difficult. If the UK wants to leave the customs union, the question is ‘where do you have a border’? The Good Friday peace agreement guarantees an open border. The alternative is to have the border between the EU and the UK in the Irish Sea. This would result in the DUP withdrawing support for the government, leading to its collapse. The border issue also raises questions concerning the ‘integrity’ of the UK.

Corbett believes there are ways around the border issue, pointing out that for some agricultural products a sea border already exists. “There are only six ports of entry to Northern Ireland, you only need to check those points instead of multiple land frontier crossings. So, you could envisage things like that if it were politically acceptable.”

During the 2017 elections, Theresa May used the political slogan of ‘No deal is better than a bad deal’. UK unions and businesses are now highlighting the negative economic and practical consequences of a ‘no deal’, with dire warnings on the need to stockpile food and drugs in preparation. Corbett says, “It was a foolish thing for her to say.”

He adds, “The analogy is often made with business negotiations where you can always threaten to walk away. If you do that in a business negotiation, the status quo remains. However, in this context, if you walk away, then you leave on the deadline of 29 March next year with nothing settled.

“Legal limbo on everything from citizens’ rights to the continuity of contracts, to aircraft landing rights. Everything that is currently regulated by commonly agreed EU rules, that Britain helped create. The UK will fall back on to WTO tariffs when it comes to international trade, which would be punishing for the economy.”

Corbett is also fearful that Brexiteers, as led by Boris Johnson, may push the government into a no deal.

“The far-right and neo-liberal right of the Conservative party, think that the economic downturn would be a price worth paying. They want to break free from rules of the common market that we’ve adopted over the years. This is a neo-liberal preference for a free-for-all market. A corporate free-for-all, a Trump-style market.

“One thing about the single market, and why it works relatively well, is that it is a market with rules. Rules to protect workers, to protect consumers, and the environment. Although they certainly could be improved, they are significant enough to drive the neo-liberal right apoplectic, that they are desperate to abandon. They fancy the idea of leaving without a deal, because they think any deal will tie Britain, to a degree at least, to meeting those same standards.”

Although Corbett wants to see a second referendum, or People's Referendum, on the final deal, it is yet to become official Labour party policy. When questioned why not, he points out that his party has laid down six tests that any deal needs to meet. If it does not, Labour will vote against that deal in the House of Commons.

"If the deal is defeated then Parliament should decide what happens next, with a referendum being one of the options to consider. Labour is not ruling out the possibility of a referendum if the deal is rejected."

He also points out that Labour's shadow secretary of state Keir Starmer, is very clear that the party has not ruled out the referendum option.

However, other senior members of his own party, such as Andy Burnham, mayor of Greater Manchester, described those that have called for another referendum as "arrogant", while others have claimed that it is anti-democratic.

Corbett says, "As for the argument that having a referendum on the actual deal is an affront to democracy, I'm not sure how asking the people to consider the actual deal once it emerges is anti-democratic. They would be able to vote, not just on the idea of Brexit, but printed in black and white, what it entails.

"How is that undemocratic? In what way would it be more democratic to ignore their views and proceed regardless? Because if it is a costly, damaging Brexit, destroying jobs, harming our public finances, and jeopardising rights, then it would be quite wrong to proceed without giving people the chance to reconsider.

"If you buy a house, you say, 'Yes, I'll put in an offer, I'll have that.' When you then get the survey and you find out it's got shaky foundations, cracked walls, and a leaky roof, you have the right to say, 'Oh, no, I've changed my mind.' If you're a trade union and you're negotiating, you've got a mandate from your workforce to negotiate, you get a deal, then it's always put back to the workforce to confirm or reject that deal."

He is confident that voters will understand the need for a referendum on the final deal. But "people won't understand going over a cliff regardless, when public opinion has shifted against it."

Given the various political contradictions and splits in the UK Parliament, Corbett points to the strong possibility that Brexit may not actually happen.

"If the UK government comes back with a bad, damaging, or costly deal that threatens jobs, and jeopardises economic wellbeing, there is a good chance that deal will be rejected by the House of Commons. What happens next? You can either renegotiate or reconsider. Renegotiate; will that be possible? Will the EU-27 be willing to start from scratch, would you get a deal that is any different? Possibly not. In which case, you must go back to reconsidering whether Brexit is a good idea now that you know what it actually entails."

Given how divided the country is on Brexit, when asked if a failure to carry out Brexit would lead to further cleavages, Corbett points out that public opinion has started moving towards remaining in the EU.

"Although the establishment is split, and the public is also split, the interesting thing is that public opinion has not done what everybody expected. People expected the public to rally behind the result of the referendum two and a half years ago. Everybody will say, 'Okay, we've had our debate and we voted, let's get on with it.' You would have thought sixty-odd per cent would be backing Brexit. That's

not happened, it has begun to shift in the other direction with more and more people questioning Brexit. And certainly, a lot more people saying, the actual deal should be put to the public.”

Despite the sometime acrimonious relationship between the UK and EU, Corbett admits if Brexit does go ahead, his European colleagues will miss their UK counterparts. “The absence in general of British MEPs will be missed. But there will be some who they will be delighted to see the back of, I won’t say which category I belong to.”

Between now and the departure date of the UK from the EU, Corbett will remain very busy. “As leader of the Labour MEPs, I attend Shadow Cabinet meetings. I’m a member of the Labour party’s National Executive Committee, where of course Brexit is an important issue, and in the wider debate back home as well.”

And as to what happens afterwards, if Brexit goes ahead, Corbett says, “I’m saving up to buy a horse: to ride off into the sunset.” Given Corbett’s experience and knowledge of EU policymaking, don’t be surprised if he carries on playing an influential role in Brussels after Brexit.

## About the author

Rajnish Singh is commissioning editor for the Parliament Magazine

## Tags

[Brexit](#) [5]

[Trade](#) [6]

## Categories

[International Relations](#) [7]



## Site Sections

- [Home](#)
- [Content](#)
- [Policy](#)
- [Magazines](#)
- [PM+](#)
- [Thought Leader](#)
- [EU Elections 2019](#)
- [Editorial Calendar](#)
- [Policy Events](#)
- [Event Coverage](#)
- [MEP Awards 2019](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

## **Services**

[Dods PeopleDods](#)  
[MonitoringDods](#)  
[ResearchDods](#)  
[EventsDods](#)  
[Training](#)

## **Media & publishing titles**

[Politics HomeThe](#)  
[HouseThe](#)  
[Parliament](#)  
[MagazineHolyrood](#)  
[Total PoliticsPublic](#)  
[Affairs NewsCivil](#)  
[Service](#)  
[World](#)  
[PublicTechnology](#)  
[Training](#)  
[JournalDods](#)  
[Parliamentary](#)  
[CompanionVacher's](#)  
[Quarterly The](#)  
[European Union and](#)  
[Public Affairs](#)  
[Directory](#)

## **Dods events**

[Westminster](#)  
[BriefingDigital](#)  
[Health & Care](#)  
[ScotlandMEP](#)  
[AwardsThe Skills](#)  
[SummitScottish](#)  
[Public Service](#)  
[AwardsPublic Sector](#)  
[Procurement](#)  
[SummitPublic](#)  
[Sector ICT](#)  
[SummitCyber](#)  
[Security](#)  
[SummitCyber](#)  
[Security](#)  
[2017Training](#)  
[Journal Awards](#)

## **Partnership events**

[The Health and  
Care Innovation  
ExpoCivil Service  
LiveCivil Service  
AwardsChief  
Nursing Officer for  
England's  
SummitWomen into  
LeadershipThe  
Youth Justice  
ConventionSocitm  
Spring  
ConferenceNHSCC  
Annual Members'  
EventDods at Party  
Conference](#)

---

[Privacy PolicyTerms & ConditionsAdvertisingSponsorship Subscriptions](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/richard-corbett-brexit-talks-are-chaotic-and-catastrophic>

**Links**

- [1] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/ilhan-kyuchyuk-what-lacking-brexit-talks-what-british-are-normally-known>
- [2] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/mariya-gabriel-future-europe-and-world-inevitably-digital>
- [3] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/miriam-dalli-we-need-more-ambitious-co2-reduction-targets-ensure-eu-does-not>
- [4] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/adina-ioana-v%C4%83lean-simple-fact-commission-proposed-circular-economy-package>
- [5] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/brexit>
- [6] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/trade>
- [7] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/international-relations>