

Driven by the heart

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Interviews

As the balance in European sentiment increasingly leans to the right, veteran politician Alexander Stubb tells Lorna Hutchinson that election candidates need to become more personal if they are to strike an emotional chord with people on what it means to be European.



Alexander Stubb | *Photo credit: Jean-Yves Limet*

You're in Brussels to attend an EU40 event to advise young candidates standing in the upcoming European elections. What would be your key advice to them?

If I were to give three recommendations, they would be first, be yourself; second, drive a positive [election] campaign and last, know your stuff.

You mentioned at the EU40 meeting that these days, you are more driven by the heart than the mind, can you expand on that?

I used to be, in many ways, the epitome of a rational politician, trying to make arguments based only on facts. However, I now increasingly realise that nowadays, particularly as far as Europe is concerned, it should be more about the heart than the mind, or at least you should combine the two. You cannot always simply rationally argue about the wonders of the internal market, or immigration policy, or the Euro; you have to try to strike a chord and think about what it means to be European, what it actually means for you. Interestingly enough, Brexit brought out the first real pro-European movement that we've ever seen in the United Kingdom. And it was because it touched an emotional chord with the remain supporters.

How can those candidates who are pro-European counter the political messages of the Eurosceptics? How can they fight the current of anti-European sentiment?

I think sometimes they should do it through questions. They should pose the question to the electorate: do you want a Trumpian world? Do you believe that politics should be what Trump stands for? Or do you want a Brexit world? The example that I give is that leaving the European Union is a little bit like leaving the Internet: if you really want to make a difference, it's probably better to stay and try to influence the content. I think these types of examples will resonate and echo with people, because the EU is becoming more personal. I do think that this [European] election is going to be a lot about "what kind of a Europe do I really want? Am I against it or for it?" So hopefully, we'll get a lot of people moving because of the current situation that we face.

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Given the heightened sense of anger with politics, both in the EU and in the US, fuelled largely by social media, why should people still enter politics?

I was an MEP for four years, I was in government for eight and a lot of my friends have asked me why I ever wanted to do it. I'm a late bloomer in politics; I think you have to have the passion. You have to have that classic feeling of "okay, I can improve the world." If you do have it, then just go ahead and put yourself on the line. I fully understand that nowadays it's tougher than ever before. I wouldn't say the sense of anger is fuelled only by social media, it's just a general media atmosphere. I think the traditional media tries to hide behind social media. In fact, traditional media uses a lot of material from social media to try to get its stories through. How do you counter all of this? You have to do it with facts. We have to bring the positives as well. Whether that's going to be enough, I really don't know. But I would still recommend that people take that jump into the unknown and enter politics. You can always come back and do something else.

You're known for your positive outlook and energy. Did you speak about the power of positivity to the EU40 meeting?

I've always found that energetic and positive campaigns are the most fun to be part of, because if you have a grumpy old candidate who's just basically huffing and puffing their way through the campaign, you don't feel personally very inspired.

What are your thoughts on your fellow EPP member, Viktor Orbán? How do you feel about his latest attack on Jean-Claude Juncker?

I have to speak in a personal capacity, and perhaps more as a former EPP Spitzenkandidat; I think I made my views quite clearly known at that time. I said that we should be involved in a three-stage process. The first was a negotiation on values; the second was a commitment to those values and the

third was an implementation of those values. Obviously, if we jump past one and two, we can see that Viktor Orbán does not represent traditional EPP values. He talks of illiberal democracy. I have nothing against him personally, I know him and I have worked with him as a colleague and Prime Minister. However, if he feels that the EPP framework is too small for his illiberal ambitions, then I think he should probably draw his own conclusions. Of course, I'm just a spectator, eating popcorn on the sidelines, but needless to say I'm quite pleased with the fact that a lot of our sister parties have taken action and filed letters that will then be discussed in a few weeks. I still think that the best speech in Helsinki was the one by Donald Tusk, where he defined what Christian Democracy means. For me it's also about cordial behaviour towards the other [person]. I would never pursue a smear campaign against anyone, let alone against the President of the European Commission, who is from my party. I think it goes beyond human decency and I'm quite disappointed. To be honest, I don't think that apologies are enough; I think it's time to move on.

"A lot of these populists, whether from the left or the right, are looking for the easy solutions. But when they come into power, they discover that, whoops, I guess it wasn't that easy after all"

Is there still a place in the EPP for Viktor Orbán? By allowing him to stay in the EPP, is this a silent endorsement of his anti-EU policies?

My answer to this question is no. For me, politics is about values and principles, not power. And against this background, I think it is time for all of us to draw our adult conclusions now. We should say goodbye.

Do you fear the expected influx of Eurosceptic populists being elected in the upcoming European elections? if so, why?

Yes and no. I think when I was running for the European Parliament for the first time in 2004, there was already - if not a landslide for right-wing or left-wing anti-European populists - an emergence nevertheless. We have to understand as democrats - with a small "d" - that part of democracy is accepting election results that don't necessarily please you. At the end of the day, you just have to try to make your case and argue why you would be a better choice. This is why the combination of liberal democracy, social market economy and globalisation is the foundation of the most successful societies in the world. A lot of these populists, whether from the left or the right, are looking for the easy solutions. But when they come into power, they discover that, whoops, I guess it wasn't that easy after all. Then they usually get voted out and voted down. This is what happened in Finland with the True Finns, and this is what we will see happening all around Europe. So, the balance of Europe is right now leaning a little more towards the anti-European side, but I'm confident that it'll swing back.

After losing to Manfred Weber in the Spitzenkandidaten process, do you still support the process?

Definitely, definitely - now more than ever. The reason I went into the race was to provide credibility for the whole process. So of course I back it, as much as I also back Manfred Weber to become the next Commission President. I wish him all the best and good luck, albeit I do it from the sidelines as a humble banker, not as a politician. I hope he does well, and I'm really pleased to see what he's doing with his campaign as well. I'm also pleased to see what other lead candidates are doing, whether it's Timmermans or the Greens. I wish ALDE would also have a lead candidate. It's all about having a European debate.

Do you think that Manfred Weber will become the next European Commission President?

It's not up to me to decide, but there's no algorithm that can predict any of the five top nominations this year. However, if I was a betting agency, I would give the shortest odds at the moment for Manfred Weber. But there are a lot of moving parts in all of this.

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What are your thoughts on how Brexit is playing out? Do you think that the UK is going to leave the EU with a deal on 29 March?

The short answer to that is no. I personally believe that there will be an extension [of Article 50]. How long that extension will be is another question and where that extension will lead, I really don't know. Usually, as I've said in the past, things tend to sort themselves out at the end of the day, particularly when it comes to European negotiations. So, unfortunately, I would still put my money against Brexit happening. However, how that Brexit will look like and when it will happen is just a guessing game. The twists and turns of the Brexit tragedy are still so unpredictable and rapid that no one knows what's going to happen. I think when I woke up, mid-summer 2016, I wrote "please let this be a nightmare." I still secretly wish that it is a nightmare and that we'll all snap out of it at some stage. It is self-inflicted pain and lunacy. We all know that there will be no winners in this process. Yet it's very difficult for the European partners to do anything to stop it; we can only be flexible and give the United Kingdom all the time it needs to sort itself out. We all know that the UK is going to be much worse off after this - it's just a question of how bad it's going to be. I do think that the Brexiteers, who did not have a plan, should be held accountable.

Do you have much hope that people power will win out in Brexit?

I do. In fact, that's actually the only hope that I have - that there will be a People's Vote, a second referendum. If, of course [the result of] that referendum is again Brexit, then okay, we've now finally had the debate, and this is your choice, that's fine. If that referendum [result] is Remain, then we would be in for further societal turbulence, that's for sure, because the Brexiteers won't swallow it easily. However, I always try to look for the silver lining - for me it's shown just how ludicrous and how difficult it is to leave the European Union in the 21st century. Just as we approach the integration of societies, of technologies, of borderless worlds, to then say "we're going to do it alone" is ridiculous. You have a football team of 28 players and then suddenly you decide to start playing alone, I think that's just outright stupid. You're going to lose every game.

What do you think the key political issues are going to be during the upcoming European elections and do you think that migration is going to dominate the campaigns?

We should pat ourselves a little bit on the back and say that the worst [with migration] is over. The next issue is going to be climate change - for some it's a little bit abstract but for others it's really concrete. I do think one of the themes will be values. I believe that in insecure times, people have to grab onto something, and that is usually something they know the best; human rights, fundamental rights, freedom, democracy. That will be one of the themes. Also security, in all of its various forms - it could be economic security, it could be defence and security - many different issues. A final theme could be the future of Europe. I know it's a bit nebulous for some people, and a bit too big, but I think

people will start talking about what are the borders of Europe or whether Brexit is a bad thing or a good thing - the limits of European integration. At the end of the day, we just have to keep on reminding ourselves that this is a process, that the European Union is more than an international organisation but less than a state. I really liked the article that President Macron wrote in European newspapers to ignite the debate; I think it was genuinely courageous to address all Europeans, rather than his colleagues.

Are you confident or fearful for the future of the EU?

I'm quietly confident that pro-Europeans will be able to win over a majority of the hearts and minds in Europe.

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