

Remarks by Michel Barnier at Green 10: “Is Brexit a threat to the future of the EU’s environment?” – European Parliament

Thank you Peter Liese for having organised this event, with Green 10 organisation represented by Cécile Toubeau,

Thank you also Jo Leinen.

I see also many other members of the European Parliament, where I come almost every week to discuss Brexit, with the EP Brexit Steering Group, the various political groups and committees.

Thank you for inviting me to speak about this essential topic of the environment.

I was myself environment minister some time ago and I have not forgotten the work which we did with other Member States and at EU level.

I remain very close to these issues.

Before that, some 20 years earlier, I took part as a young Gaullist in the campaign in favour of the accession of Denmark, Ireland, Norway, and the UK.

I have never regretted this vote.

The result of the Brexit referendum is one which we can regret, but one which we have to respect and implement.

When I took the job of Chief Negotiator in October 2016, I had three main questions for the UK.

These questions are still relevant today.

1) Does the UK want an orderly withdrawal or a disorderly withdrawal?

Today, I think we can be positive that the UK government indeed wants an orderly withdrawal.

Last month we reached a decisive milestone on this first question.

- o We agreed on a legal text for the protection of citizens’ rights, an essential priority for me, for the European Parliament and Member States; and the financial settlement.

- o At the same time, we reached a political agreement on a transition period of 21 months, until the end of December 2020.

o And we agreed on several other separation issues, from customs procedures to the circulation of goods already placed on the market, or the UK's commitments for nuclear energy, and Euratom more broadly.

However, we are not there yet.

In particular, we still have to work on two major points of divergence – on how to avoid a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland and on the governance of the Withdrawal Agreement.

And we have some separation issues where we have not yet reached an agreement: for instance, the protection of geographical indications and police and judicial cooperation.

We can hope to reach an agreement on the withdrawal if we stay in this spirit in our negotiations until October this year.

2) The second question is what kind of future relationship does the UK want with the European Union?

Here also, Theresa May has brought some elements of clarity.

In her speech of 2 March in the Mansion House, she confirmed that the UK will be leaving the Customs Union and the Single Market.

She also confirmed the UK's red lines. The only available model is, therefore, that of a free trade agreement. Other models remain of course on the table in case the UK position would evolve.

3) But there was, and there is, a third question, which in my view is quite relevant for our debate today: does the UK want to stay close to the European regulatory model or to distance itself from it?

This is an important decision because the European regulatory framework is underpinned by key choices that are dear to us: our social market economy, health protection, food security, fair and effective financial regulation, and high levels of environmental protection.

There will be no ambitious partnership without common ground on fair competition, State aid, guarantees against tax dumping and social standards and, not least, environmental standards.

I know that the European Parliament, like the Member States and the Commission, is particularly vigilant in this respect.

This is also well known in the UK.

As recently noted in the UK press, across the full range of issues – air and water pollution, habitats and species protection, waste management and recycling, energy efficiency, carbon emissions and energy policy – it is EU regulation that sets high standards of protection^[1].

And the UK has often been at the forefront in shaping and deciding European

rules.

And of course, you, members of the European Parliament, and representatives of NGOs, have contributed greatly to shaping these rules.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What we hear from the UK could be seen as reassuring.

In her Mansion House speech, the Prime Minister pointed specifically at the environment, saying, and I quote Theresa May, that “the EU should be confident that we will not engage in a race to the bottom in the standards and protections we set.”

These are the clear words from Theresa May.

This is reflected in the UK’s proposed 25 year plan on the environment.

This is welcome, but my responsibility as the EU negotiator is to remain extremely vigilant.

To me, that means two points, on which the European Parliament also insisted in its latest resolution.

And these two points reflect what we discussed with Member States and the European Parliament in our seminars on the future relationship. All of which has been published on our website.

I – First point, our future partnership must include precise provisions on a level playing field, especially in environmental matters.

- Without a level playing field the UK could, now or in the future, decide to reduce environmental protection to gain competitive advantage.
- Such measures would open up the possibility for more pollution and environmentally harmful production in the UK. They would also increase pollution for neighbours.
- Reduced UK ambition on air pollution could result in neighbouring states (Ireland, Belgium, France the Netherlands) needing up to 9% more effort to reach their clean air objectives – with significant additional costs.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am not prejudging anything as to the UK’s future policies.

But let me be clear: these questions are not only economic or social, but also political.

Why?

Because the answers will be key to the ratification of any future deal by each national parliament, and obviously also by some regional parliaments, and by the European Parliament.

This is why in the future relationship we should commit to no lowering of the

standards of environmental protection.

The agreement on the future relationship with the UK should include a non-regression clause.

This can be inspired by the CETA or Japan FTA provisions, but this will need to go further. It should prevent any reduction of the key pre-Brexit standards.

Of course, a strong level playing field requires effective oversight and enforcement of environmental rules.

This is needed to ensure the confidence of citizens and companies in the fairness of the future arrangements with the UK.

II – Second point: the UK will have to keep to its international commitments.

The UK itself is a party to many international environmental agreements.

At the moment, it often meets these obligations on the basis of EU rules.

We expect the UK to continue to meet these international obligations once it has left the EU.

Let me take three concrete examples.

1. Both the EU and the UK have ratified the Paris Climate Agreement.
 - o We should continue to promote the global solutions to climate change which the Paris agreement offers.
 - o The UK has always pushed for strong global action and high emissions reduction targets.
 - o We expect that it will continue to set itself the same level of climate ambition after leaving the EU. This will also open the way for practical cooperation between us.
2. Second example, in line with the United Nations convention, the EU and the UK will also need to cooperate on the management and conservation of around 100 shared fish stocks to ensure their long term sustainability.
3. Third example, the UK should continue to protect birds and other migratory species in line with the Bern and Ramsar conventions.

Dear Friends,

- If we make sure that our future partnership is based on a level playing field;
- If the UK continues to meet international standards and obligations on the environment;
- If we can assure our citizens of continued effective enforcement of environmental rules;
- Then – to respond to the title of this event – we would have strongly

mitigated the threats of Brexit to the future of the EU's environment.

- Our negotiating team will follow these goals, and we will continue to do so in close coordination with the European Parliament and in full transparency.
- Because, once again, this negotiation is unprecedented.
- Because the organisations you represent have the right to know how the negotiation unfolds.
- And because transparency is key for the public debate that we need on Brexit.
- This negotiation will not and cannot be secret.

Thank you.

[1] The Guardian, 4 April 2018,
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/03/brexit-harm-environment-michael-gove>