

“There is no cherry-picking on Brexit”

Michel Barnier debates Brexit negotiations with European Economic and Social Committee

“Brexit means uncertainty”, said **Michel Barnier** at the outset of the debate with EESC members on 6 July, *“uncertainty for citizens, businesses and jobs”*. He stressed his task was to negotiate on the basis of what the United Kingdom put on the table, which included no free movement for EU citizens, full autonomy of laws, no role for the European Court of Justice and the autonomy to sign free trade agreements. The latter involves leaving the customs union and the single market.

But there was also one certainty, he said, namely that the UK would become a third country, and this would entail three main consequences:

1. The basic freedoms – free movement of people, goods and capital – are indivisible;
2. There is no option for a sector by sector participation in the Single Market; and
3. The EU will keep its own independence in setting economic and social rules and standards that all 3rd parties must respect.

The United Kingdom and the EU need to be aware that Brexit has a cost and it is the task of the negotiating team to keep this cost as low as possible. *“From the EU’s side, there will be neither aggressiveness nor arrogance, said Mr Barnier, “but we need to be ready for any situation, even a no deal situation, although this would be the worst-case scenario.”*

Members of the European Economic and Social Committee voiced their concerns on many aspects, including consumer rights, social rights or the trade policy. Irish and Northern Irish members raised the issue of the Good Friday Agreement, which was mainly achieved with the help of the EU.

Luca Jahier, President of the EESC’s Various Interests Group stated that *“A bad deal is better than no deal, we need to achieve a deal at any cost, because nobody voted to become poorer, nor for the end of the Irish peace process.”* Mr. Jahier proposed that *“half of the frontier negotiations should take place at the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and that a cultural route of peace be established between the Irish border and Nicosia in Cyprus, where another wall still exists in Europe.”*

Business investments are high on both sides of the Channel. Brexit could jeopardise business relations; particularly as uncertainty is a disruptive factor for businesses. **Jacek Krawczyk**, President of the Employers Group stressed that *“The main expectation for employers is that companies have certainty on the withdrawal agreement and clarity about the future relationship. These negotiations create challenges for both sides, but the EU is no ‘restaurant à la carte’. Here we fully support the Commission: there are no low hanging fruits to grab. Transparency and integrity – this is what*

we appreciate.”

Gaby Bischoff, President of the Workers Group referred to the fact that 4 million workers are affected by Brexit, that is to say the equivalent of the population of two Member States – Estonia and Latvia – taken together. She stressed that *“we cannot accept that people could be used as bargaining chips. “Workers’ rights– protecting jobs, working and living conditions – must be high on the agenda. We cannot let EU workers’ rights be undermined by low pay, low regulation or tax havens.”*

Mr Barnier stressed that the EU too wanted a fair and balanced deal, and that failure to reach a deal would be the worst option, as it would mean reverting to a distant past, including trading relations with the UK regulated by WTO rules, making products more expensive.

EESC members agreed with Mr Barnier that although Brexit is important and a good deal is in the interest of both the 27 and the UK, the most important thing is the future of Europe. *“We have to make people aware about the countless advantages of EU membership. Brexit has shown very clearly that many people are not aware of the fact that these advantages come from being a member of the European Union. In the UK for many people the awakening has already begun. Now it’s for the European stakeholders to make the EU27 stronger and more cohesive. The EESC is ready to be a main partner in this process”*, concluded EESC President **Georges Dassis**.