

The UK and the EU: in or out?

On 21 April 2016 at One Bunhill Row, five speakers from both sides of the debate joined staff and partners from Slaughter and May to discuss whether Britain should leave the EU.

The panel

Philippe Chappatte, head of the firm's EU group:

Luke Johnson, entrepreneur and author:

Jon Moynihan, former executive chairman of PA consulting:

Caroline Lucas, MP for Brighton Pavilion:

Simon Walker, Director General of the IoD:

Gabe Winn, of Britain Stronger in Europe:

Chairman

Leave

Leave

Remain

Remain

Remain

Sovereignty

For the leavers, sovereignty was an absolute: either the UK had it or it did not. Their most fundamental reason for leaving the EU was the desire to regain for the British people the right to govern themselves. For those in favour of remaining, sovereignty was a subtler concept, which could be modified by any international agreement. Caroline Lucas thought that pooling sovereignty could be a powerful tool for getting better results on the world stage - by being in a club, Britain had more influence, and was much better off.

"Sovereignty is like pregnancy. It either exists or it doesn't." Jon Moynihan

"A man in a desert is 100% sovereign. A man in a club is much better off." Gabe Winn

Immigration

Brexit supporters regarded borders as intrinsic to any nation's integrity, and argued that any country should be able to decide for itself who enters it and who leaves it. Their opponents celebrated the material and cultural richness that comes from immigration, and observed that large and important parts of the British economy - including the NHS - benefit greatly from EU immigration. They also pointed out that millions of British people take advantage of free movement by exercising their rights to live in other European countries.

"If you have no control of your borders, you start to wonder what a country is." Luke Johnson

"Freedom of movement is something to be celebrated... an extraordinary and precious gift."
Caroline Lucas

Economics

The remain camp challenged its opponents to cite a single credible economic report or statement by a respected institution which had found that the UK would be better off outside the EU. Jon Moynihan responded with an attack on the existing literature on the topic, subjecting the Treasury's recent report to special criticism.

There was an exchange about whether Britain after Brexit would be able to keep the benefits of EU membership without being subjected to the burdens - such as financial contributions and free movement of people - that countries like Norway bear. The disagreement boiled down to whether Britain needs Europe more than Europe needs Britain, and whether the EU would want to deter other member states from leaving. Different interpretations emerged depending on whether the issue was addressed in absolute or relative terms: Europe sells more to Britain than vice versa, but Britain's sales to the EU make up a larger percentage of its exports.

"200 pages of a first-year undergraduate essay." Jon Moynihan

"Almost half of all we sell goes to the EU." Gabe Winn

Internationalism

Remainers championed the EU as a model for international cooperation. They cited the ways in which it has fought Ebola in West Africa, piracy off the coast of Somalia, and climate change through its pivotal role at the Paris talks. Luke Johnson responded by criticizing the EU's deal with Turkey, which he said demonstrated the EU's ineffectual response to humanitarian disasters like the Syrian crisis.

"A sordid deal with Turkey" Luke Johnson

"The EU rose out of the blood and bones of those who died on a continent riven with conflict."
Caroline Lucas

Scotland

Simon Walker doubted whether, if the UK left the EU, it would remain a single country for much longer, since it would open the door to a new Scottish referendum, which the Scottish nationalists might well win. The exit camp saw this threat as less significant, arguing that since the last Scottish referendum it had become more obvious that Scotland could not prosper economically on its own.

“The UK would not be single country within three or four years.” Simon Walker

“Highly unlikely... given the price of oil.” Luke Johnson

Summing up

In response to a question from the floor, the panellists in favour of staying agreed that the UK already had the best of both worlds: inside the EU, but outside Schengen, the Euro, and various other European projects.

Those on the other side returned to the theme of democracy, claiming that a vote to leave would be a vote for good government and democratic accountability.

“There isn’t one single destination for Europe.” Simon Walker

“You’ve got to be able to kick the rascals out.” Jon Moynihan