

Alumni Insights – In conversation with Stephen Kinnock

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Stephen Kinnock, labour MP and former Director for Europe and Central Asia at the World Economic Forum in Geneva, is the second College *ancient* to share his views on Brexit, UK politics and life at the College with us this semester.

By: Sammy Kerr

Kinnock spoke to LVC shortly after Labour MPs were whipped (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/01/a-fifth-of-labour-mps-defy-three-line-whip-to-vote-against-article-50-bill>) into voting for the Government's Article 50 bill, which has been invoked today. Kinnock unflinchingly describes what awaits the UK outside of the EU, but simultaneously identifies free movement of people as desperately needing alteration. If anything positive is to come out of a harrowing 2016, he hopes that the memory of his friend Jo Cox will inspire people to rediscover their appetite to fight for progressive values.

Kinnock radiates positivity about the College, recalling that it was "a life-changing and life-shaping experience".

“The sense of unity is long-lasting. In fact, I had dinner with a friend from the College this weekend, and whenever I’m in Brussels I go and see everyone I can.” As a former Gouden Hand resident, Kinnock affectionately reminisces about the student bar, but only goes as far as saying that “we had a lot of fun”.

He stresses his love of the diversity and finding that students always had a lot more in common than they had differences, despite coming from widely varying backgrounds.

“The College is such a melting pot; it was a fantastic experience to watch everyone come together over the course of the year”.

The diversity of College students was particularly important to Kinnock, as it afforded him the chance to meet his future wife in Bruges. The College’s 1992-93 Charles IV Promotion produced one of its most successful *anciens*, and Kinnock mentions his former POL coursemate, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, immediately. She and Kinnock married in 1996 and, despite his prominent career, she went on to greater success becoming the first female Prime Minister of Denmark 2011-15, and now Chief Executive Officer of Save the Children in London.

When the conversation turns towards Brexit, Kinnock is understandably less enthusiastic:

“Voting to trigger Article 50 was definitely the most difficult thing I’ve had to do in my political career. After the vote I felt as if my right arm had been chopped off and I was whistling ‘Ode to Joy’ balefully for the next few days.”

He declares himself very concerned by the Prime Minister’s “massive gamble of veering towards a hard Brexit.” Kinnock worries that those who were seduced by ‘Vote Leave’ are due for “a very bumpy ride when the EU27 close ranks, leaving us isolated.” Kinnock predicts a backlash when Brexit negotiations don’t prove to be as swift and smooth as promised. “The tone of British politics is currently a real problem” he says, anxious about who will be blamed should Brexit under-deliver.

“Instead of soaring away from the EU, we’re going to be mired in a bureaucratic miasma, and people are going to be very disappointed.”

As Brexit approaches, Kinnock diagnoses the Government’s desperation to build other partnerships as being so acute that it has resorted to appealing to demagogues. “We’ve handed control and the whip-hand to other players now” he says, pointing out that “we’re going cap-in-hand to Mr. Trump and we’re going cap-in-hand to Mr Erdoğan. Is that really going to help our sovereignty?”

Since the referendum, attention has shifted to Stephen Kinnock’s Labour Party to hold the Government accountable. However, despite Brexit and all its attendant chaos, the Prime Minister is still significantly more trusted (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/17/jeremy-corbyn-now-less-popular-michael-foot-stage-leadership/>) than Jeremy Corbyn, and the Labour Party recently lost a by-election to the Conservatives. Kinnock deems this unacceptable, stating that “the cast-iron rule in politics is that Oppositions do not lose by-elections to Governments. That is Rule Number 1.”

Last year, Kinnock supported Owen Smith’s bid to oust Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party, not least because of the Labour leadership’s lukewarm campaigning (http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jeremy-corbyn-allies-sabotaged-labour-in-campaign-and-fuelled-brexit_uk_576eb1b5e4b0d2571149bb1f) for Remain.

“We are a very weak Opposition at the moment, lacking the teeth and the edge to keep the Government on its toes.”

Kinnock says that “the mood music here is that Theresa May is able to steamroller things through because we’re not standing in their way.” He is however intent on standing up to prevent the UK crashing out of the EU and falling back on WTO rules. Kinnock believes that there “is no way we’ll get the divorce settlement and future agreement done within 2 years”, adding that he would strongly support a transitional deal with the UK ending in the EEA until a deal like the EU and Canada’s CETA can be found.

This sounds like a moderate compromise, but it disregards how strongly the Brexit vote was linked to hostility towards immigration. If this saga ends with the UK out of the EU, but without any means of curbing freedom of movement, voters from all sides are likely to be furious.

For Kinnock, the evolution of the EU’s logistics, as well as a “root-and-branch” reform of free movement, is vital. Fittingly, Kinnock repeats a quote attributed to John Maynard Keynes: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?”

Kinnock wants the EU to implement a multi-speed decision-making process “with the founding Member States and a few others forming a small core.”

“The fact of the matter is that the EU is desperately lacking in agility.”

Faced with right-wing populism across Europe, Kinnock declares that “the Maastricht free movement of labour provisions are not fit for purpose in the modern EU.” He says that things were different in 1992, during his time at the College, and that the Union of 15 Member States was much more homogenous. “We lived in a completely different world” he argues “and when you look at the vast difference in minimum wage now, that creates pressures.” To resolve the issue, he proposes a two-tier system with free movement of labour for skilled workers on the one hand, and with quotas being set for low- and semi-skilled workers on the other.

Kinnock is quick to reject the argument that Central and Eastern European countries would never accept such a change. “In many Eastern European countries, there are big concerns about ‘brain drain’. You’ve got people who have extremely advanced educational qualifications and skills who are here driving vehicles for Uber.” Surely, Kinnock adds, that can’t be right for either labour market. He refutes the allegation that criticising immigration is pandering to the far-right. Criticising freedom of movement won’t do him any electoral harm, but whether his plans are like Khrushchev’s imaginary bridges is unclear.

Kinnock understands the importance of tackling the far-right far more urgently than most people. When Jo Cox was assassinated by an extreme right-wing terrorist in June, he lost a close friend. Speaking about Cox, with whom he shared an office, Kinnock stressed that the values she embodied are timeless. Indeed, MPs from both sides of the House have recently been seen wearing badges with the message ‘Happy to chat’ for the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. Named in her honour, Cox was in the process of setting up a commission against the “silent epidemic” before she was killed.

Kinnock mentioned that “trust in politics has already been corroded”, and his comments about the current ugliness in British politics are not overstated. At Jo Cox’s memorial service in Trafalgar Square on the day before the referendum, Brexit campaigners chartered a plane trailing a ‘Leave’ banner. The plane flew overhead, repeatedly interrupting her husband’s tribute to her.

“Jo’s tragic assassination is an opportunity for us to see 2016 as a wakeup call. Freedom of speech, equality before the law, pluralism, integration, empathy between people, democracy. We have to recognise that these things that we cherish and hold dear don’t grow on trees, they haven’t just sprouted out of the ground as if by magic. You actually have to fight for them. You have to defend them and you have to act.”