

MEPs call for swift Brexit to end uncertainty and for deep EU reform

Debate on the European Parliament

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USPA NEWS - The UK must respect the wish of a majority of its citizens, entirely, fully and as soon as possible, by officially withdrawing from the EU before any new relationship arrangements can be made, says the European Parliament in a resolution voted after an extraordinary plenary debate on Tuesday.

MEPs also stress the urgent need for reforms to ensure that the EU lives up to its citizens' expectations. After a debate between Parliament's political group leaders, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Dutch minister Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, representing the EU Council's rotating presidency, Parliament voted a resolution on ways forward after the UK referendum on 23 June. The text was approved by 395 to 200, with 71 abstentions.

Parliament calls upon the UK Government to respect its people's democratic decision via a swift and coherent implementation of the withdrawal procedure, i.e. by activating Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union so as to allow withdrawal negotiations to start as soon as possible. To prevent damaging uncertainty for everyone and to protect the Union's integrity, the UK Prime Minister should notify the outcome of the referendum to the European Council of 28-29 June, in order to launch the withdrawal procedure and negotiations as soon as possible, urge MEPs.

MEPs recall that the European Parliament's consent for the withdrawal agreement and any future relationship is required under the Treaties, and that it must be fully involved at all stages of the various procedures. Parliament also calls on the Council to change the order of its presidencies to prevent the withdrawal process from jeopardising the management of the day-to-day business of the Union. The UK was set to take on the presidency in the second half of 2017.

Parliament will also change its internal organisation to reflect UK citizens' will to withdraw from the EU. The current challenges demand reform to make the Union "better and more democratic"[1], and to "deliver what citizens expect,"[2] MEPs insist. "While some Member States may choose to integrate more slowly or to a lesser extent, the core of the EU must be reinforced and À la carte solutions should be avoided,"[3] says the text.

The debate

Opening the extraordinary session, European Parliament President Martin Schulz noted that this was the first time that a plenary session had been convened at such short notice, but also that the UK citizens' decision to leave the EU was equally unprecedented. He warmly welcomed Lord Hill and thanked him for his work in the EU Commission and deciding to step down, having campaigned for Britain to remain in the EU. His statement was followed by standing ovations from both MEPs and Commissioners.

"It will be in the interest of us all to ensure that a future relationship will be constructive and mutually beneficial. No-one will benefit from a prolonged period of political limbo," said Dutch minister Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, representing the EU's rotating presidency. "At the same time, we should allow the UK the time it needs to recuperate and take the necessary decisions. Now, a part of Europe's challenge is to convince citizens that unity remains the best choice. The fact that fragmentation is no longer unthinkable, should gravely concern us all," she added.

"We must respect the will of the British people,"[4] said European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, and "there must be consequences"[5]. He asked the British Government to "clarify"[6] the situation as soon as possible, so as to prevent uncertainty. "No notification, no negotiations,"[7] he said, insisting that there would be no secret or informal talks with London. To UKIP leader Nigel Farage, he said, "you are fighting for the exit, the British people voted for the exit, so why are you here?"

"We won't leave you on your own,"[8] EPP group leader Manfred Weber (DE) promised Britain's youth, more than 73% of whom voted "remain." [9] Populists had won the referendum, he said, adding "shame on you"[10] to Nigel Farage, whom he called a "liar"[11] in a reference to allegedly false campaign claims. "We now expect an Article 50 notification and swift and fair exit negotiations,"[12] he

insisted, adding that "the times of appeasement are over" and urging politicians to stop "bashing Brussels" and take responsibility.

"The European Union cannot become a hostage to the internal party politics of the Conservatives. The British authorities have to notify us as soon as possible of the United Kingdom's desire to leave, said S&D group leader Gianni Pittella (IT). "Today I say clearly that our group will oppose with all its strength the translation of the "Fiscal Compact" into EU law. Budgetary flexibility is good, but we have to go further to encourage public and private investments. Either Europe provides answers to these questions or sooner or later it will be swept away," he added.

Now that the British people have spoken, it is time to look to the future and stop replaying the past, said ECR group leader Syed Kamall (UK). The EU treaties are clear and they must be respected, he added, calling for clarity about the timetable for the withdrawal negotiations. Britain and the EU must remain close partners for years to come and Britons must become "good neighbours and not reluctant tenants," he said.

"It's hard to accept a decision you disagree with", but the UK's choice must be respected, said ALDE group leader Guy Verhofstadt (BE). However, the way in which the Leave campaign succeeded, with posters like Nazi propaganda and lies that created a climate of fear and negativism. Continuing today's uncertainty would make things worse. "Only triggering Article 50 immediately can stop this - 27 member states should not wait for a disorientated Tory party to get its act together," he said.

GUE/NGL leader Gabriele Zimmer (DE) said her group could not agree with the resolution tabled by most groups because it lacked self-criticism. The financial crisis, the "brutal treatment" of Greece, Italy and other countries had left bad memories with EU citizens, and it was precisely those in Britain who feared for their jobs, healthcare and pensions, who voted to leave, she said, adding that "the EU has not shown it can protect its citizens against the risks of globalisation."

A new project is possible

"Today, there is a possibility to put forward a new project, but do not be surprised if between Denmark, Ireland and all way to Greece, there is a lot of suspicion", said Philippe Lamberts (BE) on behalf of the Greens/EFA group. "We need to link up to the roots of the European project and deliver peace and sustainable prosperity. Is it possible that we ensure human dignity for all human beings, inside and outside the EU? Our answer is yes!", he concluded.

Following a call of order by the president to calm the chamber to allow for the next speaker to be heard, EFDD leader Nigel Farage (UK) noted that those who had laughed at him 17 years ago, when he arrived in Parliament announcing a campaign to leave the EU, were not laughing now. "You, as a political project, are in denial," he said, predicting that the UK would not be the last member state to leave the Union. He warned that if the EU were to reject "a sensible trade deal," then the consequences would be far worse for the EU than for the UK. "Even no deal is better for the UK than the rotten deal we have now," he said.

ENF leader Marine Le Pen (FR) called the UK vote the "by far the most important historic event since the fall of the Berlin wall" and an outcry of love of the British people for their country. It was a slap in the face for "EU supporters" and showed that the EU project is not irreversible, she added. Delaying implementation of the decision would not be democratic, she warned.

Non-attached member Diane Dodds (UK) said that the decision of the people of the UK "cannot be rewritten." She accused EU leaders of having "turned a deaf ear" to the frustrations that British people have voiced "for years - but today you are listening," she added and nonetheless said that Britain "had not turned its back on Europe." Replying to MEPs' comments, Ms Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert said: "The answer is not more or less Europe, but it is a better Europe. It is clear that we have to act. Our Union only exists if it is supported by the millions of citizens and that support cannot be taken for granted. The common challenges we all face will not disappear and no country on the face of the earth can face these challenges alone."

Jean-Claude Juncker underlined that the Commission was not to blame for the referendum result. He pointed out that the UK had not voted on austerity policies or the adequacy of protection of the EU's external borders, because it belongs neither to the euro nor to the Schengen Area. He too accused Mr Farage of lying: "you fabricated reality," he said. For Nigel Farage, things in the UK "are looking pretty good" after the referendum, there is only some political upheaval, namely the resignation of the Prime Minister and the British Commissioner, "for the right reason," he noted. If the vote sweeps some of the British political class, "so be it," Farage said, adding that he looks forward to celebrating next year "Independence day" on 23 June.

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