

Editorial

Europe for the Many

‘Let’s make this the most popular citizens’ initiative ever,’ said Guy Verhofstadt MEP, Brexit co-ordinator for the European Parliament, in response to the ‘Permanent European Union Citizenship’ initiative. This, our second European Citizens’ Initiative, a formal invitation to the European Commission to legislate, received some 80,000 endorsements in two weeks, compared to 24,000 in a year for the first one, ‘Retaining European Citizenship’ (see *Spokesman 136, 137*).

What has changed? First of all, Exit Day on 29 March 2019 draws closer, which focuses the minds of all EU citizens, including Brits. Secondly, there is increasing awareness that if EU citizenship can be taken away from some 60 million UK nationals, it might, in the future, be removed from nationals of other Member States. There is demonstrable *risk*.

‘I am trying to craft a concept of associate citizenship,’ Andrew Duff, President of the federalist Spinelli Group and a former Member of the European Parliament, told a public meeting in Brussels in early September 2018. Mr Duff remarked that the Article 50 negotiations on the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union were at a ‘crunch point’, but it was not altogether clear what would happen to people. He was anticipating the political declaration that will accompany any Article 50 agreement to take account of the ‘framework’ for the UK’s future relationship with the Union. This declaration would be prepared by the European Council, not the Article 50 taskforce, and would provide the first draft of the guidance for negotiating the future relationship, in the form of an ‘association agreement’ between the European Union and the United Kingdom after Brexit. The template for such an association agreement with the UK is the compendious one concluded with Ukraine in 2014, which runs to more than 4,000 pages.

It is essential that the association agreement, to be negotiated the ‘instant’ the UK departs, contains a ‘strong’ chapter on citizens’ rights, including installing a ‘fresh concept’ of ‘associate citizenship’, said Mr Duff. What would such status mean? Mr Duff cited franchise, consular rights and, indeed, European citizens initiatives, notwithstanding that the draft Withdrawal Agreement, in its clauses on the Transition, specifically annuls the rights of UK nationals with respect to elections and citizens’

initiatives.

Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, the European Parliament, following the lead of Mr Verhofstadt, Charles Goerens and some other MEPs, has kept open the door to a form of associate citizenship of the European Union. The precise meaning of such a status remains to be seen, although, as we have seen, Mr Duff gave some indications of what it might entail. He also said that ‘privileges’ enjoyed during a time-limited transition would, in the longer term, become ‘intolerable’ if they were not transformed into rights. This is likely to be a long road.

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Meanwhile, a new European Parliament will be elected in May 2019, followed by a new Commission. If the UK withdraws in March, per the present Article 50 timetable, there will be no elections in the UK and no Members of the new Parliament from the UK. This severe democratic loss is highlighted in the short text of the Permanent EU Citizenship initiative. The rising tide of far right populism in parts of Europe has its counterpart in the UK, as Liz Fekete indicates in this issue. It is already colouring the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament, with the avowed American racist, Steve Bannon, aiming for a far right ‘supergroup’ in the new assembly. Annulling elections in the UK at this critical time removes a timely opportunity to expose and debate the unlawful operation that secured a slender majority for Brexit, and the dire consequences for the UK society and economy that it has unleashed. Those at the sharp end, such as EU nationals in the UK and British in Europe, continue to languish in Limbo.

Stuart Holland traces Europe from the Left, starting in the 1960s, as revealed in the work of Jacques Delors and Antonio Guterres, among others. Their emphasis on what has become known as ‘Social Europe’ is still far from fully realised. In the wake of Brexit, as the Union begins to revisit Social Europe, it is fitting to recall all this sustained work for a ‘New Deal for Europe’ in the words of one who was there. In Britain, while the Trade Union Congress rightly holds out the prospect of a ‘popular’ vote on the Article 50 agreement, and its General Secretary urges an extension of negotiations if more time is needed, public opinion increasingly inclines to the longstanding trade union principle of ‘what we have we hold’. The UK may yet uphold European unity.