

## **BREXIT & THE DIOCESE IN EUROPE**

### **CHURCH OF ENGLAND EUROPE LINK OFFICERS APRIL 2018**

The result of the Brexit referendum came like a bolt from the blue to the scattered Anglican congregations that make up the Diocese in Europe. I was at a WCC meeting in Trondheim and I awoke to the news of the result with a profound sense of shock.

The vast majority of our clergy and many of our church members hold British passports and came to live, work or retire in continental Europe. They came with the understanding that they could treat their new country as a home from home because they could enjoy the same rights and services as the country's own citizens. They received local state funded health care and local social security payments for sickness or unemployment. They had local employment rights and the right to set up a business without visas or special permits.

Suddenly all these assumptions came into question. Would they suddenly have to start paying for private health care? Could they face expulsion from the country if they lost their job? What about the future of their children – would they continue to have access to free state education and funding for higher education study? Would UK pensioners have the value of their pensions maintained, or would they be frozen at the level reached when Britain left the EU? For those who had lived on the continent for more than 15 years there was a burning sense of injustice that, in spite of a manifesto promise to the contrary by the then governing party, they had been excluded from voting in the Brexit referendum despite being amongst those who stood to be affected most by the outcome.

In the face of real uncertainty and anxiety, my Suffragan Bishop and I sent out a pastoral letter to try to calm nerves and bring Christian hope. We acknowledged that for many the result had '*generated profound feelings of sadness, grief and shock*'. We counselled patience and calm reflection as at that stage Article 50 had not been triggered and no change was immediately likely. We also observed that '*Our ecumenical partners have reacted with dismay to the UK's referendum result*' and stressed that '*it is now more important than ever that we reassure our brother and sister Christians at a local level of our unwavering commitment to our partnership with them.*'

When the dust had settled on the formation of Mrs May's new government following David Cameron's resignation, I made contact with a Minister in the newly formed Brexit Department, Lord Bridges. He promised to come over to Brussels to take soundings and answer questions. Assisted by my EU Affairs Attaché, David Fieldsend, we assembled a delegation representing all seven of our archdeaconries for a meeting in Brussels in January 2017. As it turned out, on that day Lord Bridges had to remain in London to answer parliamentary questions, but the UK Embassy in Brussels gave us a video conference facility so that we could gather there and be linked live to the Minister in London. The Ambassador and key staff from the UK Permanent Representation to the EU also attended to help with answering questions. Although the link with London came and went during the session, the local diplomatic staff did a sterling job and our delegation went away, if not totally satisfied with the answers, at least reassured that their concerns had been heard at the highest level. In the event, when the UK Government did eventually (in June 2017) issue its proposals for future reciprocal rights for UK and EU citizens, most of what had been asked for at the

roundtable had been included, including a unilateral pledge that the UK government would continue to uprate pensions for citizens residing on the continent at the same rate as if they were still living in the UK.

However, what the UK government offered towards EU citizens living in the UK was generally less generous than what was proposed by the European Commission. Eventually in December 2017, after protracted negotiations, the UK moved most of the way towards the EU position and a deal was done. In particular, the ‘cut-off date’ after which EU citizens arriving in the UK could no longer claim free movement residence rights the UK (and vice versa) moved from mid-2017 to – Brexit Day 29 March 2019, to 31 December 2020 and the end of the transition period. The legal text of the withdrawal agreement on citizens rights agreed last month now contains nearly everything that people in our Diocese wanted, with the important exception that British people settled in one EU country will not have the automatic right to live or work in another EU country. What is more, as I keep saying: in European deal-making “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” so giving people in my diocese a sense of certainty and reassurance is difficult!

The legal text of the draft withdrawal agreement is worth looking at even though I wouldn’t recommend reading it all. It is called: ‘Draft Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Authority. (I wonder how many referendum voters were aware of that second bit?) It specifically includes Gibraltar in my diocese, who, of course, voted by a massive majority to remain. It then sets out in 128 pages of closely argued text what it will mean for Britain to leave. It is like reading the arrangements for a complex divorce in which a 40 year relationship is step by step undone. I have to say I find the document desperately sad reading.

The second phase of Brexit negotiations have not had quite the same direct relevance or concern for my congregations as the citizens’ rights issues. Those most intensely affected are a very special group of church members, concentrated in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, namely those working for the main EU Institutions – Parliament, Commission and Council. Those working in the European Parliament will be leaving at the European Elections at the scheduled 2019 elections anyway. Officials in the other institutions will feel the effects in loss of jobs or promotion prospects as soon as the UK stops paying into the EU budget, and that will be December 2020. There is real pastoral need amongst this group: people who may have given most of a lifetime to public surface and now face a hugely uncertain future.

This leaves the vexed question of the terms under which the UK be able to trade with the EU after Brexit and transition are over. Throughout the Brexit negotiation period there has been a glaring mismatch between what the UK government aspires to and what conditions it is prepared to accept – Mrs May’s infamous ‘red lines’. At a recent summit meeting Michel Barnier illustrated this mismatch graphically. To have totally frictionless trade (like Norway) you have to be a member of the Single Market – but Mrs May has ruled out the UK staying in the single market. To remain in the Customs Union (like Turkey) you have to foreswear having an independent foreign trade policy – but Mrs May has ruled that out too – and so on. The only models which allow Mrs May’s red lines to be respected are the free trade agreements the EU has negotiated with South Korea and Canada. As a result, UK-based firms and businesses will inevitably see increased costs and inconvenience in trading with the EU.

This is not a top concern to people in my diocese, though it will impact those running businesses registered in the UK, who may want or need to re-register them within the EU.

Sitting where I do in my office in Brussels, and with the responsibility that I have for Christians of many nationalities from across the EU and beyond, I could never have taken the neutral stance in the Brexit referendum campaign that the central institutions of the Church of England decided to take, so I spoke up in favour of the Remain option from the start. I was subsequently gratified to find that pretty much every other diocesan bishop in England also supported Remain. This does beg the question of why the central institutions of the Church were so muted and unwilling to take a stand until the very last closing days of the campaign when Archbishop Justin was willing to go on record as intending to vote for Remain. But it was not just the Church, civil society institutions across England generally kept a low profile, trade unions, professional associations and so on. Some were scared of how the Charities Commission might interpret English law circumscribing political campaigning; others were just fearful of the Eurosceptic elements in the British press. I posted regular items on the 'reimagining Europe' blog set up by the Church's Mission and Public Affairs unit at Westminster. I, and my EU Affairs Attaché, both spoke at cathedral events set up under the auspices of this project. The two cities we spoke in (Newcastle and Winchester) did vote for Remain, but that was not enough to swing the vote nationally!

As I reminded our congregations in my pastoral letter, the Church of England *'has had English-speaking chaplaincies on the European mainland for over four hundred years.'* The first full Bible in English was printed in the port of Antwerp in Belgium. William Tyndale toiled tirelessly to complete this translation work before he was betrayed to the authorities and incarcerated in Vilvoorde Castle on the outskirts of Brussels and eventually executed there. When William of Orange crossed the Channel to take the crown of England his wife Mary brought with her the Anglican chaplain who had been living in Holland with them.

We as a diocese will continue to follow in their footsteps and ensure that Anglican worship is available to those living on the continent, that people may find their path to Christ through it for many generations to come. However 'soft' it may be, Brexit – if it happens - will be a shock. But God's people will carry on. Apart from places where people work directly for the EU Institutions, we do not expect significant falls in congregational numbers. Indeed all the signs are of increasing international student numbers (for whom postgrad courses in European universities are predominantly given in English) and the growth of offices, factories and outlets of international inter-governmental organisations, international companies and international civil society organisations. These are producing more and more 'international citizens' in Europe for whom our accessible English-language Christian worship will continue to meet an important need.