

Speech to the Salisbury for Europe AGM

2030 hrs Wednesday 10th May 2017

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The very first political event I attended, back in 1978, was a meeting organised by the European Movement, at Salisbury College, for local 6th Formers. I was then at Bishop Wordsworth's School. That's how my involvement in politics started.

All my life Liberals have championed Britain's membership of the EU, because we believe that Britain's best chance to succeed is within it - not apart from it.

We believe that free trade, and free movement of people, is a good thing. It creates and fills jobs, increases economic prosperity and helps pay for things like the NHS, schools and public services.

I wasn't a fan of Margaret Thatcher. Those of you who know me will know what a massive under-statement that is. But there's one thing that she and I could agree: the value of the European Union, and the Single Market. There's a famous photo of her, beaming, in a woollen sweater, adorned with European flags, and her enthusiasm as she told the British public: "... what a prospect that is. A single market without barriers, visible or invisible, giving you direct and unhindered access to the purchasing power of over 300 million of the world's wealthiest and most prosperous people."

For me, though, the value of our partnership with our European neighbours, is not just about jobs and prosperity; it's also about security, diplomacy, protecting our common environment, shared culture and social connections. We all have so much to gain. And that's why I was angry when the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, gambled it all away to stave off UKIP. If you are willing to gamble something so precious, you need to make sure you're going to back a dead cert.

But like it or not, last summer's referendum did take place. I and all of my family voted to remain - as I'm sure did all of you. But I believe frustration with the EU won the day, and we lost by the narrowest of margins: 52% to 48%. Bitter pill though it was, Liberal Democrats believe we have to recognise and acknowledge that decision, and negotiate to secure the very best deal for Britain.

Although 52% opted for a Departure from the EU, I don't believe they voted for a Destination. I don't believe they voted to leave the single market. They didn't vote to have families torn apart as we have heard tonight. They didn't vote to have the 3,000,000 Europeans, who are the lifeblood of our NHS, our schools and universities, and our local communities, played as human pawns.

That's why I – and the Liberal Democrats – believe it is imperative that the final deal is put back to the British public for a decision. The terms of Brexit will have a huge impact on jobs, security, and the opportunity to travel and live abroad. Once those terms are known, only then can people decide if Brexit – or remaining in the EU – is right for them, their families, their environment, and their future.

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