

# The time to move towards the EU has arrived

Published: January 13, 2026, 3:08 am

---

As the [Guardian has revealed today](#), a combination of government and opposition leaders together with senior civil servants and business representatives (but notably, apparently no trade unionists) have met together to discuss the future of the UK outside of the European Union. They are working on the premise that to UK has, so far, not found its way forward outside the EU. As working premises for a meeting go, that has to be one of the biggest understatements of all time.

There are three obvious conclusions to draw from this. Firstly, when both Michael Gove and Gisella Stewart, two notable leaders of the Leave campaign, are involved in such discussions it is reasonable to conclude that the awareness of failure has now permeated deep into the awareness of those who campaigned against EU membership.

Second, the presence of senior Labour shadow cabinet members, like David Lammy, suggests that this awareness must also exist within Labour, even if their presence was not sanctioned by the leadership (and this is not stated).

Third, neither situation is surprising. Not only is it glaringly obvious that Brexit has not worked, but it is also apparent that there is no plan to make it work. In fact, all that is known of any Brexit related plan at present is the legislative destruction that is currently being debated in parliament with regard to the ending of business regulation, employee rights, environmental protection, and many other issues, all solely because they were EU inspired.

In that case, I obviously welcome the fact that there is recognition on the part of senior politicians from both sides of this issue, and from both leading UK political parties, that their denial of the very existence of this problem is wrong. Recognising that a mistake has been made is the first, usually traumatic, step towards putting matters right.

However, meeting to discuss this issue is not enough. Nor is quietly recognising that the mistake has been made enough. First of all, that mistake has to be publicly acknowledged. I suspect that we are someway from that point as yet. I doubt that this will happen before the next general election, which might (we hope) be the last where

the Leave / Remain mean divide will be influential.

Then a realistic appraisal of the options that are available to us must follow. Realistically that cannot, at present, include an immediate return to the EU because there is little or no sign that there is a desire on the EU's part for this to happen, and who can blame them? Instead, what is very obviously required is a pathway to realignment with the EU.

In the first instance, that would mean the restoration of all the legislation that the government is currently planning to abandon just because it was EU inspired.

Then there will be a need to talk about reinstating standards that allow the reintroduction of the single market, which is a necessary precondition of rejoining.

After that, the barriers to re-entry into a customs union must be removed.

Critically, such a move also requires movement towards freedom of movement. I cannot, for example, see the EU taking the UK back unless it was willing to join the Schengen area.

I am under no illusions about how long this process will take.

I am also aware that there is a 30% or so minority in the UK population who are vehemently opposed to this course of action. Their reasons might be considered wholly irrational by a majority in the UK. In many cases, the racism that underpins their sentiment is not just irrational but is repugnant. But they do exist and time will be needed to take them with this process to the extent that it is possible.

I also know that the deal that the UK will get on rejoining the EU will not be the same as the one that had when it departed. For example, I have no doubt that as a condition of rejoining the UK will have to commit to joining the euro. However, as I continually note within the context of Scotland having to make a similar commitment if it were to apply for EU membership in its own right (as I think it will at sometime), what is requested is a commitment, but there are no timescales attached, as Sweden has proved.

Most importantly, what is required is that this process start. The policy of exceptional isolationism that motivated Brexit, based as it was on a concept of English superiority, has to be rejected in favour of one of international cooperation that reflects the reality that this country (however, we define it) has always existed on the basis of trade, sharing of culture, and free movement of people with its nearest partners, all of whom happen to be members of the EU now. To pretend there is any other basis on which what is now rightly recognised as a small country on the north-west coast of Europe might coexist in a complicated world is to peddle a falsehood, which is what the Brexit campaign always did. The time to go forward has arrived.