

Speech

European Council meeting 28 June 2016: PM press conference

From: Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street>) and The Rt Hon **David Cameron MP** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/david-cameron>)

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Prime Minister David Cameron gave a statement and answered questions following the European Council meeting on 28 June 2016.



Prime Minister

Good evening everyone. I've been coming to these European Councils for 6 years now, and barring an emergency council, of which there have been many in the last 6 years, this will be my last one. They can often be long and frustrating and difficult, but when I've attended these councils I've always remembered that this is an organisation and this is a formula that has brought together countries that not that many years ago were in conflict, and in spite of all the frustrations I've always found it very reassuring that we had found a way to talk and to work together and to resolve our differences in dialogue and in argument. And so as I leave the European Council, probably for the last time, I pay tribute to all of the presidents and prime ministers and everyone who works here who have made these meetings as successful as they have been.

Tonight obviously was an important meeting. It's the first time that the European Council have met since the British people voted to leave the European Union, (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-the-result-of-the-eu-referendum-27-june-2016>) and there was universal respect for this decision, and this decision will be carried through in Britain and it is understood that it will be carried through here in the European Union.

But of course the tone of the meeting was one of sadness and regret. Our partners in the European Union are genuinely sad that we are planning to leave this organisation, and that was very much the tone of the discussions at the dinner tonight. But they were very constructive discussions, they were very positive, they were very calm, they were very understanding that Britain should seek and Europe should seek the closest possible relations as Britain leaves the EU. Close relations over trade, over cooperation, over security. While Britain is leaving the European Union, it will not, it should not, and in my view it won't turn its back on Europe.

In many ways, I wish the people at home had been able to hear some of the discussion we had at dinner tonight. The countries, our partners, our friends, our allies, talking about the values that we share, the history that we

share and the things that Britain has brought to Europe. The Estonian Prime Minister talking about how the Royal Navy helped to secure the independence of his country a hundred years ago. The Czech Prime Minister talking about how Britain had been a home for Czechs fleeing persecution in their own country in 1948, in 1968. Those countries of Eastern and Central Europe that feel such a debt to Britain for standing by them when they were suffering under communism and for supporting them as they joined the European Union. The French President, talking about the visit that we will be making later this week to the battlefields of the Somme, where British and French soldiers fought and died together for the freedom of our continent and for democracy and the values that we share. As I say, it was – the Maltese Prime Minister, talking about the extraordinary history between our countries. The Irish Prime Minister pointing out that between the 11th century and for centuries to follow, England and Ireland had been in conflict, but recently – and he said now – our relationship has never been closer, and that what a good partner we had been to them, both inside the European Union and today.

So, as I say, a positive, constructive, calm, purposeful meeting about how we should now take forward this agenda of Britain leaving the European Union but wanting to have, I think rightly, the closest possible relationship that we can in future. There was a lot of reassurance that until Britain leaves, Britain is a full paying member of this organisation and so is entitled to all of the benefits of membership and full participation until the point at which we leave.

I think there were some very important messages tonight. Obviously messages that the economic problems and challenges that we face in Britain are also problems and challenges that are going to be faced in the rest of Europe. A very important message that, while we seek the best possible partnership that we can after leaving the European Union, it is impossible to have all of the benefits of membership without some of the costs of membership. That is something the next British government is going to have to think through very carefully.

And also, while I think what you might have read and seen about a clamour for Britain to trigger Article 50 without delay, that was not the mood of the meeting, that was not what the clear majority of my colleagues and partners said. But of course everybody wants to see a clear model appear in terms of what Britain thinks is right for its future relationship with Europe. That is work that I can start as Prime Minister today with the new unit that we're setting up in Whitehall. We can examine all the different options and possibilities in a neutral way, and look at the costs and the benefits, but it will be for the next British Prime Minister to determine – and the next British cabinet to determine – exactly the right approach to take and the right outcome to negotiate, and that decision to trigger Article 50 (<http://www.lisbon-treaty.org/wcm/the-lisbon-treaty/treaty-on-European-union-and-comments/title-6-final-provisions/137-article-50.html>) will be for the next British Prime Minister and the next cabinet, I would suspect, after they've made that decision about the outcome they want to pursue.

As I said earlier today, when I look around that table, when I think of Europe, I think of our neighbours, I think of our allies, I think of our friends, I think of our partners, and we should be trying to find the closest relationship we can from outside the European Union to work with them over the things that are in our joint interest. Trade, our economies, making sure that we can have prosperity and success for our citizens, keeping our countries safe, keeping our people safe, and it's particularly important to say that tonight again when there has been another hideous terrorist attack in Turkey. Working together in all the ways that I suggested. That is what I think we should be aiming for.

As I said at the start of this statement, this is probably my last European Council after 6 years of coming here. As I said, obviously there have been frustrations and councils that have been more successful than others, but I would say we've made huge progress on driving jobs and growth, and that has benefited the United Kingdom, as we've created over 2 million jobs in the last 6 years. We have actually managed to reduce the quantity of red tape and bureaucracy that is coming out of Brussels. When it has come to the foreign policy of building common positions, whether that is putting sanctions against Iran to prevent it having a nuclear weapon, a strong approach against Russian aggression in Ukraine, or indeed galvanising other European countries to help with the lead that

Britain was taking in dealing with Ebola in Sierra Leone, there have been many good things that we have been able to drive forward that have been good for Britain, good for Europe, and I would argue good for the wider world.

But let me finish again where I began. Britain will be leaving European Union, but we will not be turning our backs on Europe. These are our friends, our allies and partners. I feel that very personally with the people I've been working with for the last 6 years, and I'm sure that my successor will want to have a strong relationship with the European Union and strong bilateral relations with all those prime ministers and presidents who sit around the table. We have a huge amount in common with each other in terms of the values, of democracy and freedom, and human rights, and wanting to see progress and sharing the challenges that we face as European nations.

Thank you very much for coming.

Question

Prime Minister, you've given a very clear defence of your decision to call this referendum, but given what's happened since to Europe, to your country, to your party and to your career, is there a small part of you that wishes you'd never done it?

Prime Minister

Well, obviously I wish I'd won the referendum. That goes without saying. But I came to believe, for very good reasons, that this issue of Britain's relationship with Europe and our position in the European Union was something that we needed to try and settle. It has dogged our politics, and I think it was right to, with this question, instead of leaving it to Parliament, to raise it to the people themselves. Because of course, in the time I've been active in politics, we've had the Nice Treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, the Amsterdam Treaty and all the rest of it. And you cannot go on changing the arrangements under which the British people are governed without asking them about whether they approve of those arrangements.

Now, I'm sorry we lost the referendum. I think we made a very strong case. But you have to accept the result of the British people, accept the verdict. I'm a democrat, and so of course I regret the outcome, but I don't regret holding the referendum. I think it was the right thing to do. I've been immensely proud to be Prime Minister of our country for 6 years. It's been a huge honour. But at the end of the day, you fight for what you believe in, and if you win, good; if you lose, then you have to accept the verdict. And the verdict I accept is not only that Britain has voted to leave the European Union, but it is right for a fresh leader to come along and take on that challenge of the next chapter in our country's story, that someone new needs to come and take us to the next destination. What I think I can do is provide the stability we need right now, and start the work of setting out what the options are, so the new Prime Minister can come in and make those decisions.

Question

There are young people at home right now who are very worried about what you and your party have done to the country. There are parents who are worried about what you and your party have done to their jobs. There are employers who are worried about what you and your party have done to their businesses. What would you say to them?

Prime Minister

Well, I would say that we had a very full debate about Britain's future in Europe – whether to stay or whether to leave. I threw everything into that debate, and made the arguments I think as clear as I possibly could. But I'm a democrat and we are a democratic country and the British people have decided the direction in which we should go, and I think we have to accept that and put it into place. As we do so, we should make sure that Britain remains as close as it can to the countries and partners in the European Union, and that we act to provide the economic stability that we need. But at the end of the day, you know, you cannot simply leave to Parliament decisions about the nature of the way in which we're governed; those are ultimately, I think, decisions for the people, particularly when there's been so much change. And I'll make that point that when Parliament actually had the opportunity to vote on the referendum, it voted by a margin of 6 to 1 to hold that referendum, and I think that's an important point to make too.

Question

Did you go into any detail with your European partners on perhaps why you lost the referendum, and did you have any advice for them on perhaps areas that played a huge part in the campaign, such as immigration, freedom of movement, for the deal which your successor will now have to do?

Prime Minister

Yes, I did talk about what I think happened in the referendum. I think people recognised the strength of the economic case for staying, but there was a very great concern about the movement of people and immigration, and I think that's coupled with a concern about the issues of sovereignty and the ability to control these things. And I think, you know, we need to think about that, Europe needs to think about that, and I think that is going to be one of the major tasks for the next Prime Minister.

I think obviously it is a difficult thing, because the European Union sees the single market as a single market of goods and services and capital. These things go together.

Question

Can you give us any more indication of the timing for triggering Article 50? You said that it should be after the Cabinet has decided what the options should be. Do you see any sort of backstop of when that ought to be?

Prime Minister

Well, that would be a matter for the new Prime Minister. It's a sovereign decision for Britain. The sense I was getting from our partners and colleagues upstairs was there's a lot of understanding – of course there are some people who say, "look, this should be triggered straight away, it's the only way to leave the European Union." You know, there are 1 or 2 people saying that, and I totally understand that.

But I'd say the overwhelming view is we need to get this right. We shouldn't take too much time. Triggering Article 50 will really work better if both sides know what they're trying to achieve in the negotiation that's about to begin. And I think there does need to be some intensive work by first of all the Civil Service and myself, and then by the new Prime Minister, whoever he or she is, to then decide on what the negotiating aims are for Britain, the type of model that we want to achieve, and then it'll be a decision for the British Prime Minister to take. So I can't put a time frame on that, but I think that is the right approach, I think that makes sense.

Question

A friend of yours I believe, an ally of yours, Mark Rutte, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, had a very stark verdict. He said, "England has collapsed politically, monetarily, constitutionally and economically." What do you say to that?

And can I ask you on a much more personal basis, having followed you all the years you've been Prime Minister, I sense this is a sad night for you personally. Do you feel a sadness, a wistfulness, perhaps even an anger and regret that when you leave tonight, for the first time in our nation's history, there will be an empty chair, Britain will not be represented at a major international summit?

Prime Minister

Well, first of all of course, there won't be an empty chair until Britain leaves the European Union. We remain full members all the way up to the point at which Britain leaves.

In terms of your first question, we are the fifth largest economy in the world; we have fundamentally strengthened our economy over the last 6 years. We are members of the UN Security Council; members of NATO, which will be meeting shortly; members of the G7, which has just met; members of the G20 that'll be meeting in September; a leading member of the Commonwealth, and of course we will be hosting the Commonwealth Conference in 2018. Britain is still one of the best connected nations anywhere in the world.

Now, what we have to do is to work out, now we're leaving the European Union, how we maintain a strong relationship both with the European Union and with the countries that make it up. And that's going to be a challenge, it's not going to be easy, but it is perfectly possible to do. We have to obey the will of the British people and get that right.

So, I mean, as I said, of course it's a sad night for me, because I didn't want to be in this position; I wanted Britain to stay in a reformed European Union, and that hard-won negotiation, which took a lot of hard work, that now is not operative. So getting out of ever closer union, getting a deal to restrict welfare for people coming into the UK, cutting bureaucracy and all the rest of it – those things aren't going to happen, which obviously again I'm personally sad about, because I think that was a far better outcome than the status quo, and better than leaving.

At the end of the day, I'm a democrat. I fought very hard for what I believed in. I didn't stand back and say, "Well, either outcome is interesting, one's slightly better than the other." I threw myself in, head, heart and soul, to keep Britain in the European Union, and I didn't succeed. And in politics, you have to recognise that you fight, and when you win you carry out your programme, but when you lose, sometimes you have to say, "Right, I've lost that argument, I've lost that debate, it's right to hand over to someone else who'll take the country forward."

Now, of course I'm sad about that, but frankly I'm more concerned about Britain getting its relationship right with Europe. That is a far bigger thing than whether I'm Prime Minister for 6 years or 7 years or what have you. Actually getting that relationship right is far more important. And one of the things I said to my colleagues tonight is that obviously I won't be the Prime Minister that's going to complete this negotiation, but I'll certainly do everything I can with the relationships I have – with prime ministers and presidents in Europe and with the European Council and Commission, everything I can to try and encourage a close relationship between Britain and the European Union and the countries of the European Union, and I will do everything I can back in Britain to make sure that we argue for that close relationship.

Now, that will involve compromises. I don't want to set out what I think those will be – that's going to be a matter for the next Prime Minister – but I think that whether you are listening to young people, or businesses, or constituent parts of the United Kingdom, or our friends and allies around the world from Bangladesh to New

Zealand, all of those countries will want to see Britain have a strong relationship with the European Union, and we need to make those arguments in our own domestic politics, as well as around the chancelleries of Europe, and that's something that I will certainly do even after I have stopped being Prime Minister.

Can I thank you all very much indeed for coming. Slightly better attended press conference than some of the ones I've done over the last 6 years, but you're all very welcome. Thank you.

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