

A SURREAL MEETING IN BRUSSELS

The business district at half past eight on a Sunday morning in November:

A bitter wind sweeps in from Outer Siberia. The streets of the home city of René Magritte are deserted apart from the occasional jogger and dog-walker. The restaurants and cafés are shut. The boulangerie looks open but is not, its delicious cream cakes tantalisingly out of reach. A pity there is no brick to hand to smash the shop window and get that hit of caffeine and sugar. Even the 24/7 supermarket is locked and bolted - and that would require heavy artillery.

Half an hour later, out of the cold and inside the foyer of a modern office block:

This place is home to an embassy and a European institution dedicated to fighting alcohol abuse. Was it a good idea to have that second glass of Belgian whisky after dinner? On the third floor, there is a plush, well-equipped office. In the kitchen, someone has laid on coffee, fresh croissants and sticky buns. Hallelujah!

In the meeting room, a dozen or so men and women mill around:

Something is strange, these people are all Brits. A Brexiteer terrorist cell plotting to blow up the nearby EU Commission to celebrate Guy Fawkes Day? Unlikely. This lot hark from all corners of Europe: Paris, Berlin, the Duchy of Luxembourg, the windswept Dutch seaside, the depths of provincial France, a wooded hill in earthquake-wracked Umbria and a rocky mountainside in central Spain. There are three lawyers, one of them a QC. Some have backgrounds in business and consultancy. One is a psychotherapist with a walking business in the French Pyrenees. There is a magazine publisher and an educational writer. What an odd mix.

The meeting begins. There are flip charts and post-it notes, laptops unsheathed:

So who the hell are these guys? Cranks dreaming of bringing back Esperanto? Bird lovers fighting to save the European lesser spotted bearded tit from extinction? No, they are talking about citizens' rights and Brexit, so this must be something political. But two or three of them are lifelong Labour supporters. Another couple are prominent figures in the Conservative party. There is a diehard LibDem and at least one stray Green. A broad church one might say. Can we expect fireworks, blood on the floor?

A professional facilitator chivvies proceedings along:

In two weeks' time, she will be doing the same with the heads of states of the European Union in Gothenburg. So why is she wasting her valuable time on this motley crew? The talk turns to strategy. These people have met Michel Barnier and Guy Verhofstadt. They have regular tête-à-têtes with top civil servants from DExEU and the Home Office. They hobnob with MEPs in Brussels and frequent the draughty corridors of the Palace of Westminster. Only the elusive David Davis remains beyond their reach. But of course he is a very busy man.

The debate ebbs and flows, the flip chart flips:

The group mull over strategy: what to do if negotiations break down, if there is no Brexit deal; how to campaign over the next crucial weeks before the EU summit in December. They talk about statutes and funding, organisation and outreach, media and communication. But there is something unusual about this meeting. None of the participants are nodding off. Nobody is doodling or playing Candy Crush. This is exciting stuff! And they keep it up for eight hours, with a quick break for lunch in an unheated Lebanese restaurant.

After the event, several participants sip Belgian beer in an Irish pub:

So how did it go? The agenda was covered and crucial decisions made. And without any posturing or futile argument, without big egos or hogging the floor. There is a lot to do, there are veritable mountains to climb. But everybody feels positive. The politicians playing poker with the lives of four million people are going to find these campaigners a thorn in their side. If more people join up, volunteer to take on small tasks and spread the workload, almost anything could be achieved. Next week, four of the participants will be meeting the great Monsieur Barnier himself. They will remind him of his promise not to let Brexit change people's everyday lives.

What's the name of the group? I really want to know.

Sorry, I almost forgot. It's called **British in Europe** - the coalition representing UK citizens in Europe. Get in touch. Join up. Volunteer. You can make a difference too.

Report on British in Europe Steering Committee meeting 05/11/17 by Michael Harris (EuroCitizens)

