Brexit: You will not be here with us, but I know you will be there with us

Luca Jahier, EESC President
Speaker
Dear members, dear friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last December, Boris Johnson and his campaign team managed to consolidate the Tories’ election message into three words: Get Brexit done and with that he scored a very solid victory.

At the end of January, the UK will leave the European Union after 47 years of membership. THIS is a decision of historical importance that we deeply regret but that we have to accept and respect.

Leaving the EU will produce the greatest loss of freedom since the Second World War. The freedom of businesses to trade with Europe dominates politics.

But mostly the loss of individual freedom to live and work where they want in the EU, to fall in love and bring home whoever they choose and, above all, the freedom to think and study what and where they want will be the hardest to bear. As you know, the government ordered its MPs to vote down a motion to keep Britain in the Erasmus programme.

In my humble opinion Britain’s horizons are shrinking and this is sad.

From 1973 when the United Kingdom finally joined the European Community on its second attempt, UK members always played a key role in our Committee. Many distinguished themselves as pragmatic rapporteurs with a critical mind. Their Britishness was quite a novelty at the start and it developed into an indispensable added-value for the Committee’s work.

Every Member State makes its own contribution to the European edifice and to our Committee. The UK will be remembered for having triggered the whole debate on Better Regulation and red tape 15 years ago. No stone was left unturned. The ability to venture into new grounds is one of the most striking features of our dear UK members. In this sense, their great country has left its indelible mark on the then European Community from day one and on today’s European Union in many ways.

Indeed, and this time most unfortunately, the UK’s withdrawal from the EU is another of these indelible marks – one that may however trigger a deep change in the way we look at European integration and at the Single Market.

The UK’s departure will force us to rethink the way communicate with our citizens so that they can relate in their everyday life with Europe’s tangible and verifiable achievements.

It is up to us all here to make sure that the end of this cycle is also a beginning – “a new beginning between old friends”, to paraphrase Commission president Ursula von der Leyen.

The very fact that we have to accept and respect the UK's decision to leave also means that we have to accompany our British neighbours and friends the best we can. We wish to stand by them in the long term. This is in our mutual interest. This is responsibility and partnership. If we may no longer be part of the same free-trade and free movement area, we are still on the same continent. Geography is on our side – and so is history.

Before I conclude, I would like to special thought for the late Peter Storie-Pugh, a UK member of Group III from 1982 to 1990. He was a renowned and respected veterinary surgeon, who used to draw sketches during meetings. With his ever so typical British sense of humour, I will show you his idea of ultimate torture: The ESC plenary.

For me the ultimate torture is to see you leave. But I feel like saying: Ceci n'est qu'un au revoir my friends. Ceci n'est qu'un au revoir.

You will not be here with us, but I know you will be there with us, because there is no other alternative than a strong relationship between the EU and the UK and we at EESC we will do whatever it takes to keep that strong link and bond.

Thank you.