

Translation of interview with Le Bar de l'Europe ('Europe Bar')

Presenter: Richard Corbett, hello. You're a Member of the European Parliament for the Labour Party, a party that is currently in opposition in the UK but which hopes to win the next election on 7 May. So here at the Bar de l'Europe, we've made you Brussels sprouts – something that all British people must hate, at least symbolically! Why are British people so allergic to Brussels, and to Europe?

Me: Not all Brits are. The Conservative party is pretty allergic to Europe – though they're divided at the same time, with one side that's anti-European and another that's pro-European. We, the Labour party are not allergic to Europe. Nor are the Liberals or the Greens.

Presenter: When David Cameron says that Europe costs Britain too much, is that just populism?

Me: It's true that the British net contribution to the EU is one of the largest. Even after our famous rebate, we pay more than the European average. So it does cost us. But compared to the benefits that the EU brings, the cost isn't so high. Let's not forget that the EU budget is just 1% of the EU's overall GDP, which is small compared to national budgets.

Presenter: The UK without the EU – would that be unimaginable to you? We know David Cameron has promised a referendum on whether the UK should stay in the EU, if he's elected on 7 May.

Me: Going out would be economic suicide, and political folly.

Presenter: So why is David Cameron doing this?

Me: Because his party is torn on Europe. This is a way of saving face until after the election, when he says we'll renegotiate and then let the people decide. It's a way of pushing back the problem and keeping his party together for the election.

Presenter: Are you going to win the elections on 7 May? The polls are very close for the moment.

Me: It is indeed very close for the moment, but we're confident we'll gain many seats from the Conservatives in England and Wales. It's a bit more complicated in Scotland, where the SNP will take seats from us. We'll see!

Presenter: We need to talk about UKIP. The head of UKIP is Nigel Farage, who's an MEP here in the European Parliament. He's making a lot of noise, and he got close to 30% of votes in the last European elections. Are they a party that hurts the Conservatives more than Labour?

Me: Yes. Because they're on the right, if not the extreme right, they take more votes off the Conservatives. Thankfully, from my point of view, they're currently slipping back in the polls. They're mainly an anti-immigration, anti-European party.

Presenter: Those are the two main axes of their political programme. There's a businessman in the UK who's very rich and calls himself a Polish prince – he's sent a challenge to Nigel Farage. Let's listen to what he has to say.

[video clip in English]

Presenter: That makes you smile?

Me: Yes. It's a fun way of expressing a very serious point. Nigel Farage blames everything on the EU. Any issue – for example, a traffic jam on a motorway – is the EU's fault. So that person is right to contest Farage's way of doing things.

Presenter: Has immigration become a problem in the election campaign?

Me: It's one of the themes. Farage is very clever. He links the EU to immigration, saying that in the EU you have free circulation of people so we can't control our borders. But actually the majority of migration to the UK is from outside the EU. Within the EU there's pretty much the same number of UK citizens outside the UK than there are EU citizens in the UK, and those in the UK pay more in taxes than they cost us. So it [EU migration] is really a benefit.

Presenter: If you do win on 7 May, what are you going to bring to the country? The UK is in good health, with low unemployment. It's a country that's doing well in the EU.

Me: We're not completely healthy yet! Unemployment has gone down, but that's largely due to creating precarious jobs, and the average man or woman's standard of living in the UK has gone down. It's mainly the richest percentage of the population that have benefited, and they [the government] have also cut our health service, our famous NHS. Now you have to reduce debt, especially if you're already heavily indebted. However, there are different ways of doing it. There's the austerity way, which is to cut all spending, or there's a more balanced way of doing things by using other sources of revenue and by stopping tax evasion. Tax evasion is massive in Europe. The total cost of tax evasion in the EU is the same as the total public debt in the EU. So we need to take joint action on that.

Presenter: Richard Corbett, take a small ball which contains a surprise question. You're not scared, are you?

Me: What is it?

Presenter: Read it out loud.

Me: So, here's the question: In politics, like in football, it's not always the best team that wins.

Presenter: We should say that you're a massive football fan, and you were captain of your team when you were younger.

Me: I'm a Liverpool fan. A great European team – five times European champions! It's true, it's not always the best team that wins. You can see that from various World Cups – Holland against Germany in 1974, or Hungary against Germany in 1954.

Presenter: And it is the same in politics?

Me: Yes, it can be. We lost the last election when we were clearly the better party!

Presenter: Richard Corbett, thank you for coming. Now let's try these Brussels sprouts!

Translation © 2015 Richard Corbett MEP

www.richardcorbett.org.uk