

Opening Speech for the Annual Conference of the European Network of Ombudsmen

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Colleagues, honoured guests, welcome to Brussels, and thank you all for taking the time to come here this week to share experiences and to explore what may lie ahead for all of our citizens just weeks away from the European Parliamentary elections in May.

I don't have to tell this audience of the various challenges that the EU is currently facing. And one of those challenges is also unfortunately why our keynote speaker, Mr Michel Barnier cannot be here in person today.

An informal EU Council summit will be held in Brussels later this week and, as Chief Brexit Negotiator, he was understandably needed elsewhere. In fact, elsewhere, today, rather ironically, turns out to be my home place of Dublin, so I do hope he has a productive and useful meeting.

However, such was Mr Barnier's interest in speaking to this audience because of our closeness to European citizens, that he did record an address for the seminar which we will shortly listen to. We wish him well and hope that the outcome will be the least damaging not just for the people of the United Kingdom but for everyone potentially affected.

I also want to put on record my respect and appreciation for all my Ombudsman colleagues from the UK that I have had the privilege of working with for the last 16 years, several of whom are here today.

We formed great bonds and friendships through our joint membership of what was then called the British and Irish Ombudsman Association and showed the value of collaboration across borders. We do not know what lies ahead but I expect that the friendships and collaboration will continue no matter what.

We gather here this week therefore at a time when much is contested within the EU and the tensions emerging from the rise of what is called populism are disturbing, but also challenging, the political centre ground in many member states.

Ironically, while some elements of that populism define themselves in opposition to the EU, Brexit appears nonetheless to have strengthened support for EU membership rather than



diminish it as some had predicted.

Yet wishing to remain inside the Union doesn't always go hand in hand with wishing to uphold all of the Union's values, an issue of particular concern to Ombudsmen.

The challenges faced by political leaders and would be political leaders at a time of political change, even transformation, are great. The success of Donald Trump and other populist leaders around the globe, provides an incentive to mimic their rhetoric and popular appeal.

The contagion effect that is much talked about doesn't necessarily imperil centrist governments but it can normalise certain behaviours and rhetoric that would not have been tolerated even just a few years ago.

And that poses, as I have said, new challenges for many in the community of Ombudsmen represented here today. Our role is not just to assist citizens with complaints against their administrations, but it is also to hold those administrations to account at the level of fundamental values, the values embedded in the European Treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

It is relatively easy to do so when times are good, when the rule of law is strong, and the dignity of the person is upheld regardless of gender, race, religion or sexual orientation. Much harder when the mood has changed and those values are no longer seen as necessarily universal but rather down to political choice.

This is manifestly dangerous, just as the politicisation of climate change in the US for example is also dangerous, given that the earth is unlikely to be politically selective when it reacts to our failure to take action.

But how the European Union will develop in the coming years and decades will be informed by political choices and those choices are ultimately made by individual citizens taking the time to exercise their right to vote.

We know that in many member states, turnout at European Parliament elections is low, and particularly so among the young people, the very people who will inherit this union.

Yet contemporary global issues, notably climate change and the equality debate provoked by the Me Too movement, have resulted in significantly increased youth activism as witnessed recently by the international movement of **school** students who are deciding not to attend classes and instead take part in demonstrations to demand action to prevent further global warming and **climate** change.

The degree to which that activism and political engagement will be mirrored in the May EU elections is of course unclear. People choose to participate only if they feel included in shaping the political project and that the outcome will have real, felt, meaning in their lives.



For many people across the EU, Brussels is not a place but rather a complex and faraway abstraction that has little to do with their daily lives. ‘What is the EU?’ was reportedly the most Googled question in the United Kingdom on the day AFTER the referendum.

I have no idea whether that is true or not but it is certainly true that many citizens in many member states have little emotional attachment to, or knowledge of, the role of the EU in their lives other than what some Eurosceptics and populists may tell them and which may not be necessarily true or fair.

But it can also be intellectually lazy and a denial of reality simply to dismiss ‘populism’ as a product either of racism, political careerism, or some other malign instinct.

Populism is hardly unique even in relatively recent European history and its causes invariably relate to the same issues, economic instability, cultural change, inequality, fear of technological disruption to traditional jobs, plus the perception that people’s concerns are ignored by the so called elites in power

A discussion paper published today by an inter institutional body of the EU, the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System, looks at an array of global trends to the year 2030 and the challenges and choices faced by the EU within the timeframe.

It identifies climate change as the single biggest threat, even to the survival of the planet itself, but emphasises that the protection of democracy and the strengthening of equality will be critical factors in driving positive reform at every level of our civic and economic life and in embedding European global leadership in this and other areas.

On populism, the paper says “One of the main drivers of populism is perceived government unresponsiveness rather than the desire to install authoritarian regimes. It is this frustration that outsiders can tap into and feed in disinformation to destabilise our systems – but it is not a frustration that cannot be remedied.

‘How political leaders connect to citizens, how policy options are formulated, communicated and implemented will determine how well democracy will be suited for the coming years.”

The study also notes how politics needs to be ‘relatable’ to citizens, something brilliantly understood by populists, but a political style that EU institutions in particular - the paper also notes with commendable understatement - ‘do not easily master’.

It further states, and this is directly relatable to our work, that ‘populist-proofing democratic critical infrastructure especially oversight and accountability mechanisms, will be key to protect democracies in the case of a populist government interlude’.

Once in Government, it says, populists are often tempted to hollow out the rule of law and certain basic freedoms including the press, therefore gradually eroding democracy. Strengthening the rule of law will therefore protect us from such populist erosion, it concludes.



So from these perspectives we can see multiple areas in which Ombudsmen and Petitions Committees can play critical roles because our fundamental purpose is the protection of democracy and the precise space we fit in is that between the citizen and government.

If democracy is challenged by the failure of citizen involvement, by unresponsiveness, by the failure to communicate in a way that is accessible and empathetic, by unfairness, then what we do in our daily work is manifestly critical to the solving of those problems.

The slogan 'take back control' was powerful in the UK as in the US and elsewhere because it spoke to many people's emotional sense of lacking control, of having decisions made that did not include them and did not speak to their basic needs.

So how do we encourage administrations to engage with their citizens when it comes to decision making at national or European level? What can we do to make sure that people feel they have a real say in how their lives are governed and that their votes and voices matter.

Much of my work as European Ombudsman has been about the breaking of barriers between the EU institutions and EU citizens. It ranges from gentle reminders to respond to a single communication to attempting to open up the decision making processes to greater public view and participation.

Knowing that our work has a high purpose is the key to action, innovation, and to a drive for positive and concrete outcomes, so I look forward to your views and to the views of our panel on this critical issue for the future of Europe.

And before I hand you back to Shada I would like to introduce Michel Barnier and I thank him and his team for taking time out of an immensely busy and critical week to speak to us this morning.