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Speech by President von der Leyen at the London School of Economics on 'Old friends, new beginnings: building another future for the EU-UK partnership'

London, 8 January 2020

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be back here at the London School of Economics – a place which brings back so many happy memories for me. The year I spent here taught me so much – both in and out of LSE. As anyone who knew me at the time will tell you, I spent more time in Soho bars and Camden record stores than I did reading books in Senate House Library. In order to spare my own blushes, I will spare you all the details!

But what I can say is that the time I spent here opened my eyes. I got to know a warm, vibrant, colourful, multicultural society – the likes of which I had not really experienced before. I saw people from different walks of life going out together, enjoying life, breathing in freedom. I immersed myself in this melting pot of cultures, traditions and music. And I truly fell in love with this city and this country.

This country, strong-willed, open-minded and big hearted. Proud and patriotic. Kind and generous in spirit. Full of traditions and contradictions.

Of course, certain things took longer for me to learn. The sense of humour for example, or the subtle meanings hidden in every sentence. But this only deepened my fascination and my admiration for the UK which remains as strong today as it was back then.

In the period just before and after the referendum, I thought a lot about my time here in London. I say this not just because of my love for this country. But also because of what the United Kingdom has brought to Europe and the European Union.

In a very understated British way, we do not always talk enough about this. Before the ashes of the Second World War had even settled, it was Winston Churchill who made the best case for a united Europe. I read out passages from his 1946 Zurich speech the last time I was here – it is the most eloquent and powerful case for the European Union you could ever wish to read. And while the UK initially chose to be on the outside, it eventually took its place on the inside – making us both that much stronger. The relationship may not have always been smooth or perfect – what relationship ever is. But, in my opinion, the good far outweighs the difficult.

As President of the European Commission, I want to pay tribute today to all those British people who contributed so much to the 45 plus years of EU membership. I think of the British pragmatism and leadership when it came to opening up our Union to members of our family who had been out in the cold for so long. The successive EU enlargements were historic steps for our continent and they bear the British hallmark. I think of those who helped to build our institutions.

People like Commissioner Arthur Cockfield who was known as the 'father of the Single Market'. Or Roy Jenkins, President of the European Commission while I was at LSE, who did so much to pave the way for our single currency. I think of the European civil servants of British nationality who devoted their lives and careers to Europe and have done so much to build our Union.

They will always stay a part of our family.

I think of the British servicemen and servicewomen who have helped to keep the peace from the Balkans to the Baltics. And I think of the millions of ordinary British people who have taken to the streets in pro-EU marches in the last few years.

Of course, for them, and for many millions more, the result of the referendum was a bitter pill to swallow. But it is people who make politics. And the decision of the British people in June 2016 was clear.

As much as we regretted it, the European Union has always fully respected that decision. You have seen this throughout the last three and a half years. Our negotiations were hard and long but the

European Union negotiated in good faith, trying to find solutions that defend our own interests and respect the UK's choices.

It is an agreement that we negotiated with our people and the integrity of the European Union in mind. It is one that preserves the remarkable peace and progress on the island of Ireland in the last 20 years. I will not go into the ins and outs of the negotiations on the divorce. This is done and dusted as far as I am concerned.

Before the end of the month, I expect both the British and European Parliaments to ratify the agreement. And so, in just over three weeks, on 31 January, the UK will spend its last day as a Member State.

This will be a tough and emotional day.

But when the sun rises again on 1 February, the EU and the UK will still be the best of friends and partners. The bonds between us will still be unbreakable. We will still contribute to each other's societies, like so many Brits have done in the EU, and as so many EU citizens do here every day in the UK – whether as teachers, nurses, doctors or whether working as CEOs or in NGOs. We will still have a lot to learn from each other.

The UK is home to thriving creative and cultural sectors, to cutting-edge digital innovation and scientific excellence in some of the world's best universities with brilliant minds, many of them from all over Europe. We will still share the same challenges, from climate change to security. We will still be allies and like-minded partners in NATO, the United Nations and other international organisations. We will still share the same values and the belief that democracy, freedom and the rule of law must be the foundation of our societies. We still share the same history and geography. And whatever happens, our continent will still share the same destiny, too. So as one door will unfortunately close, another one will open.

Now is the time for us to look forward together. It is time for the best and the oldest of friends to build a new future together. But as only true friends can, I want to be very honest about what lies ahead of us.

During the Withdrawal Agreement negotiation, there was always the uncertainty around whether Brexit would happen. It was an uncertainty that made the negotiation inevitably tense. This fresh negotiation will take place against a backdrop of clarity and mutual interest in making it work. The European Union is ready to negotiate a truly ambitious and comprehensive new partnership with the United Kingdom. We will make as much of this as we can. We will go as far as we can.

But the truth is that our partnership cannot and will not be the same as before. And it cannot and will not be as close as before – because with every choice comes a consequence. With every decision comes a trade-off. Without the free movement of people, you cannot have the free movement of capital, goods and services. Without a level playing field on environment, labour, taxation and state aid, you cannot have the highest quality access to the world's largest single market.

The more divergence there is, the more distant the partnership has to be. And without an extension of the transition period beyond 2020, you cannot expect to agree on every single aspect of our new partnership. We will have to prioritise. The European Union's objectives in the negotiation are clear. We will work for solutions that uphold the integrity of the EU, its single market and its Customs Union. There can be no compromise on this.

But we are ready to design a new partnership with zero tariffs, zero quotas, zero dumping. A partnership that goes well beyond trade and is unprecedented in scope. Everything from climate action to data protection, fisheries to energy, transport to space, financial services to security. And we are ready to work day and night to get as much of this done within the timeframe we have.

None of this means it will be easy, but we start this negotiation from a position of certainty, goodwill, shared interests and purpose. And we should be optimistic. We need to be optimistic! We need to be optimistic for those young people leaving school in the next few years who want to study and learn abroad. We need to look at how British and EU researchers could work together to find solutions to our most pressing challenges or to develop the new technologies the world needs. And we must ensure that we continue to work together on upholding peace and security in Europe and around the world. We must build a new, comprehensive security partnership to fight cross-border threats, ranging from terrorism to cyber-security to counter-intelligence. Events in recent years in Salisbury, Manchester, London and right across Europe have underlined the need for us to work together on our mutual security.

The threat of terrorism is real and we have to share the necessary information and intelligence between Europe and the UK to stop terrorists from crossing borders and attacking our way of life.

The nature of today's threats means that no one can deal with these challenges on its own. This is

even more true for foreign policy. Even though Britain will be outside the European decision-making structures, there will be plenty of need for common responses to address foreign, security and development challenges near and far. Be it in our immediate neighbourhood in the East and South, or in the Horn of Africa, Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa; Or be it in the wider Middle East or different parts of Latin America and Asia. The truth is that Brexit will not resolve any of the existing challenges for the EU nor the UK. Even being apart and not bound by the Treaties, it will require intensive cooperation on our foreign and security policies. That is essential, because we share so much experience and we stand for so many of the same values. We have to uphold these values, not only when it is easy, but above all when it is hard.

Dear Friends,

As we embark on this new partnership with the United Kingdom, the European Union must also continue to forge its own path in today's world. One consequence of the Brexit vote has been to strengthen the unity and the faith in Europe as a project for the common good. The truth is that Brexit has highlighted the value of being together in today's ever more unsettled world.

It reaffirmed our collective belief that we can do more when we do it together. Individually, the nations of Europe are becoming smaller and less influential on the world scale.

In 1950, before our Union was formed, the UK, Italy and Germany were among the ten most populous countries in the world. Today, only one of those is in the top 20. And while Europe's population is set to decline by the end of the century, Africa's alone will grow by more than 3 billion. At the same time, new economies are emerging and old partners are retreating back to their own paths.

And we face change and a new set of challenges. Climate change, for example: If there is one area where the world needs our leadership, it is on protecting our climate. This is an existential issue for Europe – and for the world. Last month we launched the European Green Deal. The European Green Deal is not only about emissions. It is about boosting innovation. It is about clean technologies. It is about green financing. It is about quality food. It is about modern mobility. The European Green Deal is our new growth strategy. It will create new businesses all across Europe and new markets across the world. The novelty and difference is that we will and can foster a growth model that is not consuming or extracting – but one that gives back more to the planet than it takes away.

Great Britain is as dedicated as the EU when it comes to addressing climate change and taking global leadership. A whole continent has to mobilise and the whole world needs to be part of the transformation. The European Green Deal will not happen overnight, and it will be demanding. No country can hope to handle climate change alone. But if it is the right thing to do – and if we do it together, we can lead that change.

Dear students,

Over the next month and years, we will have to loosen some of the threads, which have been carefully stitched together between the EU and the UK over five decades.

And as we do so, we will have to work hard to weave together a new way forward.

I say this because Brexit does not only mark the end of something. It also marks a new phase in an enduring partnership and friendship. It will be a partnership for your generation – and I count on you all to make a success of it.

You can choose collaboration over isolation, you can shape your continent's destiny, you can hold your governments accountable, you can refuse to be satisfied with the status quo and can turn things into how they should be.

I know the last few years have been difficult and divisive. I hope that by being constructive and ambitious in the upcoming negotiations, we can all move forward together. There will be tough talks ahead and each side will do what is best for them. But I can assure you that the United Kingdom will always have a trusted friend and partner in the European Union.

This is the story of old friends and new beginnings. In this good sense: Long live Europe!

SPEECH/20/3

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