

Meet the candidates: Labour

Richard Corbett served as an MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber from 1996 until 2009. For the past four years, he has been an advisor to President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy

By [Christy Cooney](#), Deputy Politics Editor (2013/14)

Tuesday 6 May 2014



Photo Credit: Rjd0060

Tell us about Labour's position on Europe.

What Labour says is that if we are to have a single European market, which we do, then it needs to be properly regulated at the European level to make it fair, and to protect consumers, workers, and the environment. Because having lots of different national standards on those things doesn't work. We don't want over regulation and lots of red tape. Parties of the centre-right just say "oh lets have a free-for-all market. Let's let multinational companies do what they like. We don't need regulations and so on." And we think that's naive and simplistic.

Over four million British jobs depend on trade with the rest of the EU. It's essential that we have access to that market and we have a voice around the table when the common rules for that common market are shaped. Taking us to the exit door would be an economic catastrophe.

Is Nick Clegg right to claim the Lib Dems are the only truly pro-EU party?

Labour is just as committed to staying in the EU as the Lib Dems, but we're also focused on improving the European Union. I think Clegg made a very weak defence of the EU, and didn't in my view prepare well. And it was anyway in my view an ill-advised debate, because the real debate isn't whether we should be in or out of the European Union. The real debate is how you want the EU to evolve, what direction you want to take it in, how you want to reform it.

Are there any reforms that you would like to see in Europe?

Europe is a non-stop negotiation between neighbouring countries. So reforming Europe isn't an event that happens once, it's day in, day out. But you can think of lots of particular reforms. For instance, the

European Parliament is legally obliged to move from Brussels and have its sitting in Strasbourg for one week per month. National governments imposed that requirement on the European parliament, but it's absolutely daft.

Then how would you like the EU to be different in 10 years' time?

Take the two most unpopular EU policies: fishing and agriculture. For fishing, there has been a reform just agreed, that now needs to be properly implemented, but there's always been problems with the common fishing policy. The problem of over fishing and discards need to be addressed, and this reform is attempting to do that. But whatever happens, the idea of opting out is a bit silly. You can't manage your fish stocks unilaterally because fish have the unfortunate habit of swimming from one country's water to another. You can only manage fish stocks together.

We've come a long way from the days when European agricultural policies represented 70% of the EU budget and we had beef mountains and wine lakes. But there is still room to improve the way the subsidies system is now tied to environmental objectives. A lot more could be done in that respect because it's very loosely tied at the moment. There could also be more help for the more marginal farmers, particularly important in Yorkshire, rather than the big industrial producers.

How important do you see EU membership as being to Yorkshire & the Humber?

Well I think that for Yorkshire and the Humber membership of the EU is particularly important. The Humber estuary is our great export highway, and points straight towards continental Europe. Around 350,000 jobs in the region depend on those exports. We also have a lot of inward investments which depends on access to the single European market. Other European companies come here, like the newly announced Siemens investment.

We also in Yorkshire & the Humber do quite well out of European funding. Although Britain as a whole is a net contributor to the European budget, Yorkshire and Humber is a net recipient, partly because of what we get in structural funds that helps less prosperous regions boost their economies.

Are there any schemes in the region you'd like to see better developed?

I'd like to see money targeted at a very local level to help all those groups that seem to miss out of mainstream funding - elderly unemployed men, people with disabilities, people with learning difficulties. As the employment market picks up, these are the sort of people that miss out when employment picks up, and these are some of the most vulnerable people, and I think that's where we could do a lot more than we are now.

You've said you want to "put climate change back on the agenda". Do you view climate change as something that's been sidelined?

Yes. With the economic crisis, climate change has been put on the back burner. Whether one finds that understandable or not, I think we do so at our peril. We need to focus on it, because its fundamental to the survival of mankind.

York has been quite badly affected by floods in recent years. Should more be invested in flood defences and the like?

Yes. I think the floods defence do indeed need to be a higher priority. In terms of going for European funding, there is a pot of European money to help countries that have been victims of natural disasters. But the government didn't want to apply for aid for the flooding, simply because it didn't want the label 'EU aid' for ideological reasons. The eurosceptic ministers in the Conservative Party thought "Oh no, we don't want people thinking Europe's helpful. Let's not apply for that." I think that's silly and petty.

Has the coalition presented a coherent line on Europe?

No, not at all. And quite apart from the dividing line between the Lib Dems and the Conservatives, I think the bigger problem is that the Conservatives are split three ways on Europe. There's a group that want us to leave, at the other end there are more moderate people, then there's a group in the middle that says let's renegotiate our terms of membership. But quite what they would want to renegotiate is not clear, though many people suspect it means opting out of European social legislation, the common rules for the

common market that lay down minimum standards of employment rights – paternity leave, paid holiday, the limit to working time, health and safety for workers, and so on. If you don't have those rights, you have a cases of a race to the bottom, where countries compete by lowering their standards.

You've written that a lot of the arguments for leaving the EU are based on myths. If that is true, why are certain groups so determined to leave the EU?

A large number of eurosceptics are our equivalent of the Tea Party in the American Republican party. They're right wing free-marketeters, and don't want any regulation of markets. Since the European market is one that has regulation on environmental standards, consumer protection, workplace rights, and so on, they don't like it.

Others have simply swallowed the Euro myths about the EU being this monstrous bureaucratic entity that imposes reams of red tape on everyone with no accountability, which when you look into it is not actually true, but some people believe it.

Do you think the media plays a large part in the spread of those myths?

Yes. If I compare the main national newspapers in Britain to those in other European countries, ours is unique in its domination by eurosceptic newspapers. That's probably linked to the ownership patterns. Over 67% of our national newspapers, if you measure it by their readership statistics, are owned by just three groups, all of whom have a eurosceptic agenda. That drip drip drip of constant negative stories about the EU of course affects public opinion. That doesn't happen to that extent in any other European country.

Where do you see the UK's relationship with the EU in 20 years' time?

Well I think we will still be a member and a leading member. I believe the EU is a good thing not just because its of vital national interest that we stay in, but also pragmatic reasons. We are, whether we like it or not, a group of highly interdependent countries – economically, environmentally, and so on. We need a structure to find common solutions to common problems. And also, I'm not ashamed to say for idealistic reasons that go back to the origins of the EU and why it was created in the first place. After two bloody world wars we simply had to find a better way of doing things in Europe, and have our arguments across a debating chamber, not on the battle field.



Most Read Discussed

1. [What is the difference between tax evasion and tax avoidance?](#)
2. [Review: Little Mix - LM5](#)
3. [Penalty for submitting work up to an hour late halved](#)
4. [UK government in contempt of Parliament ahead of key Brexit vote](#)
5. [How to depose a Conservative leader](#)
6. [Led Astray - The Case Against Greta Van Fleet](#)

Write for Nouse Politics

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

[Join the Facebook group](#)

More in Politics

[UK government in contempt of Parliament ahead of key Brexit vote](#)

[How to depose a Conservative leader](#)

[Aufwiedersehen: Merkel plans her departure](#)

[US turnout surges in Midterms](#)

[Trans-Atlantic spats overshadow Centenary](#)

[Up to a million Muslims imprisoned by China](#)

[About Nouse](#)
[Who's Nouse](#)
[Website Credits](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Archives](#)
[Student Discounts](#)
[Print Editions](#)
[Mini-Sites](#)
[Nouse on Twitter](#)
[Nouse on Facebook](#)
[Nouse on Google+](#)

