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FOR THE MANY
NOT THE FEW

Speech by

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Glenis Willmott MEP speech to Labour Party Conference

Glenis Willmott MEP, Leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party, speaking at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton today, said:

*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

Conference, this is my final speech as Labour's Leader in the European Parliament. Next week I will be retiring as an MEP. And while I must sadly, inevitably, talk about Brexit, perhaps you can indulge me for a minute in a little nostalgia.

Look back with me to a simpler time. Before the Tories' EU referendum divided our country. When Britain was known around the world for its values of tolerance and fairness at home and for its international leadership on the global stage.

It was a time when if Britain's negotiations went badly in Brussels, all we had to fear – if you believed the papers – was quieter hoovers and slightly straighter bananas.

It is not that long ago, but it feels like a different world to today. And while you can still find bendy bananas on the shelves of our supermarkets, a lot of changes did come through our membership of the EU, that have made Britain a better place.

Now, we might not have not solved all the problems facing our country. but I am proud of the work of Labour's MEPs who have, working through the EU, helped in the fight to overcome them:

- Better workers' rights, such as equal pay for part-time workers and guaranteed paid holiday;
- Investment in poorer parts of the country at a time when the Tory government was unashamed in its disregard for our industrial communities;
- Environmental standards making the products we buy safer and helping to clean up our beaches and the toxic air in our cities;
- Improved financial regulation, to tame the casino capitalism that led to the last global financial crisis.

Conference, I never claimed the EU was perfect, but as we now prepare to leave, we need to remember the victories we have won. Because let us be in no doubt:

many of the politicians who are leading our country through the EU exit door want to leave those rights and protections behind.

It is one of the things they always hated about the EU – their desire for a free-market free-for-all has been tempered by European values of social justice and equality, by a belief in government stepping in to help the most vulnerable.

And as our country enters its most important negotiations in my lifetime, there is a real danger that Britain will plummet out of the European Union with no deal in 18 months.

And no deal is not better than a bad deal: our country will become poorer; jobs will be lost; whole sectors of the economy will grind to a halt.

It is more than a year since the EU referendum. Six months since the triggering of Article 50. So it is a good moment to take stock of those Brexit promises.

Remember? International trade deals ready to go; British trade with Europe to be guaranteed. Nobody, be they EU citizens in Britain or Brits abroad need worry about their status.

Conference, the government is no nearer to moving forward on these issues than it was when Theresa May first entered Downing Street.

Now, the government will claim the problems lie with the EU. Theresa May has called on EU leaders to be creative and to show more imagination.

But our colleagues in Europe simply see a government stuck in a world of its own imagination: an expectation that we be released from the rules of European trade, but then just continue to trade like we used to; the idea of putting up a new customs border that both exists and doesn't exist at the same time.

Conference, it's not creative, it's science fiction. And I'll tell you something else that's science fiction: the outrageous claim that our NHS will get an extra £350 million a week because of Brexit. It isn't true. It was never true. Shame on you Boris Johnson.

Conference, I raise these examples because there is a danger that the prime minister leads the country into Brexit in the same failed way she led her party into the General Election.

Back in May and June, Theresa May kept proclaiming herself to be a strong and stable leader, when all around her could plainly see she was anything but. She was the only person left believing her own propaganda. And once again her strategy is failing.

She chose to start negotiations on a note of confrontation putting her party before the country. She tried to regain lost trust with her speech in Florence, yet all can see that her government policy is still just broad aspiration at best. From manufacturing to medicine, financial services to food processing, sector after sector of our economy is facing uncertainty. Investment decisions are delayed.

So let's be clear: the government's fly-by-night negotiating strategy is a threat to jobs, it is a threat to tax revenues, and, in undermining the economy of our country, it is a threat to the future of our public services as well.

Conference, I'm not going to stand up on this stage and tell you that I think Brexit is the answer to our country's problems. I don't. I put my heart and soul into campaigning in the referendum for Britain to stay in the European Union, to maintain our alliances, to protect our trade and the jobs that depend on it. It is what I think would have been best for the country. But, and it really does pain me to say this, we lost.

And just like after any electoral defeat, we need to pick ourselves up, look at the challenges facing our country, and begin the next campaign.

So now Labour MEPs are looking ahead to what will probably be their final vote: sometime in the next 18 months the European Parliament will have to decide whether to approve – or not – the final Brexit deal.

And on behalf of my Labour colleagues, and on behalf of our sister party colleagues across Europe, I can tell you:

- There will be no backing for a deal that undermines the peace process in Northern Ireland;
- There will be no backing for a deal that fails to give peace of mind to EU citizens in Britain and Brits who have made their home abroad;
- And there will be no backing for a deal that opens the door to attacks on workers' rights and safety standards.

So conference, as the Brexit talks continue, let's stand united in holding the Tories' feet to the fire. In challenging the heartlessness of the right-wing vision

for Brexit Britain. And let's stand united as Labour campaigns as the true voice of our country.

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