

# European Elections: SEP candidate Robert Skelton speaks at hustings in Manchester, UK

Our reporters  
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The Open Rights Group invited candidates to attend an election hustings in Manchester last Tuesday evening to discuss “Europe and digital rights.”

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate Robert Skelton spoke on the platform alongside representatives from the Labour and Conservative parties, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Greens and the Pirate Party.

In his two-minute opening statement, Skelton explained that the SEP was standing in elections to the European Parliament in a joint campaign with the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit in Germany. “Our perspective,” he said, “is of uniting workers throughout Europe for the Socialist United States of Europe. We oppose the European Union, which is a club for the rich, billionaires and bankers.”

In light of the criminal drive to war against Russia by US and European imperialism, he stressed, “We call for an end to militarism and war. There should be no more blood spilled for oil and resources.”

Addressing the issue of digital rights posed by the organisers of the hustings, Skelton explained: “Democratic rights are a fundamental issue in these elections. We call for the shutting down of the entire mass spying apparatus that exists in the UK—MI5, MI6 and GCHQ [Government Communications Headquarters]. We also call for the rescinding of all the anti-terror legislation, which is used to vastly curtail civil liberties.”

In conclusion, he explained that a socialist programme meant the vast wealth monopolised by a tiny handful of billionaires and bankers would be redistributed for the benefit of the people of the world. “All the spending cuts and austerity measures should be reversed, and billions spent providing decent jobs, free high-quality education, social and health services.”

Skelton’s remarks stood in stark contrast to those of the other participants, all of whom supported the existing social setup. With the exception of the UKIP, they supported the European Union (EU). The Pirate Party speaker described his group as a civil rights organisation that would work in the European Parliament to ensure that the European Commission “did its job.”

The speakers were asked to explain their party’s attitude to the UK’s mass surveillance programmes as revealed by Edward Snowden.

First to answer was Skelton, who said, “Our manifesto refers to the courageous actions of Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and other whistle-blowers who revealed that governments around the world, including in Britain and America, have created a vast surveillance network in which every man, woman and child on the planet is under surveillance 24 hours a day. If you don’t have privacy online, you don’t have privacy anywhere. We think this is a fundamental assault on democratic rights and we call for the ending of the vast apparatus of state surveillance.”

He went on to say that Snowden’s revelations showed that the GCHQ had “probably got an even larger operation than the NSA.” He added, “This was put into place in the 1990s and 2000s under the previous Labour government and is now continued by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.”

The defence of democratic rights, he insisted, “can be carried out only as part of a socialist perspective, for an end to capitalism.”

The mass surveillance programmes were “put in place under the guise of the war on terror,” he continued, but the real aim was to “crack down on the social opposition which is emerging as a result of the

austerity being imposed throughout Europe and the world.

“We have mounted an international campaign in defence of Edward Snowden and have written hundreds of articles on this question, held protests, interviewed Julian Assange and continue to have regular coverage of these vital issues on the *World Socialist Web Site*, which I would urge everyone here to read.”

The Conservative Party speaker said he was “not in favour of every proposal to take away people’s civil liberties,” but did not explain which ones he supported. He was strongly opposed to any suggestion that Snowden should be offered asylum in Britain.

Other speakers made some criticisms of the excessive nature of the surveillance, but none challenged the right of the state to conduct such operations against innocent citizens.

The speaker from the Pirate Party supported legal challenges in the European Court of Human Rights to curtail mass state surveillance and appealed for better “oversight” from the very bodies responsible for overseeing the mass spying in the first place.

The Green Party speaker said her party had conducted a campaign in the European Parliament to give Edward Snowden asylum. However, the Greens have made no similar call for the defence of Julian Assange. Indeed, a search of the party’s web site does not throw up a single article supporting Assange, whose own fate is no less precarious than Snowden’s.

Asked about the European Parliament’s blocking of any offer of protection to Snowden, Skelton said the decision proved that the EU has been complicit in the totalitarian spying operations and the witch-hunt carried out against those who alerted people to it.

To underscore this point, Skelton cited testimony to the European Parliament from Snowden, saying, “One of the foremost activities of the NSA’s FAD, or Foreign Affairs Division, is to pressure or incentivise EU member states to change their laws to enable mass surveillance.... In recent public memory, we have seen these FAD ‘legal guidance’ operations occur in both Sweden and the Netherlands.”

Skelton asked, “Who gives the mandate to the policies being carried out by the European Union? It is certainly not the people of Europe.” He told the audience about his own experience when reporting for the *World Socialist Web Site* on the vicious austerity

measures being implemented in Greece. “I have seen and heard stories of women with cancer tumours bursting out of their bodies because they are not able to afford medicine or medical insurance.”

He added, “This wasn’t voted for by the Greek people. This was pushed through at the behest of the European Union and the European Commission in the interests of the financial and corporate elite. This is what the European Parliament endorses.”

The real role of the EU, he said, could be gauged by the words of Greek EU commissioner Maria Damanaki: “The strategy of the European Commission over the past year-and-a-half or two has been to reduce the labour costs in all European countries in order to improve the competitiveness of European companies over the rivals from Eastern Europe and Asia.”

“There is no mandate for this, it is all decided behind the backs of hundreds of millions of people,” Skelton said.



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