

Cameron's European Challenge

On the face of it, David Cameron and the Conservatives had the perfect message on Europe in the 2014 European Parliament elections: reform, renegotiation and referendum. The last of these could only be offered by the Conservatives, so they argued as 'UKIP can't; Labour and the Lib Dems won't'. That the Lib Dems had been calling for an in/out referendum at the time of the next major treaty reform or that Labour seemed to have adopted a similar line was of little importance. The line may not have been wholly true but it was clear and incisive, reflecting the position that Cameron had finally brought himself to by January 2013, when he made his Bloomberg speech in which he pledged to hold a referendum by the end of 2017, should the Tories be returned to office in 2015.

The EP results did not augur well, however. The United Kingdom Independence Party won the elections, securing 27% of the vote and 24 seats compared with the Conservatives' 24% and 19 seats, albeit on a low turnout which meant that UKIP only had the support of about 10% of the potential electorate.

Nonetheless the 'reform, renegotiation, referendum' mantra persisted until the general election where it seemed more successful, at least in keeping Europe off the agenda for a time. The issue of membership was not salient in the elections, partly because the promise of a referendum ensured Conservative divisions over Europe were temporarily alleviated. Ed Miliband initially went on the offensive claiming that British membership of the EU would only be safe in Labour's hands. The electorate did not believe the country would be, resulting in the surprise election of a majority Conservative government.

It was time for David Cameron to deliver on his European promises. Yet, Cameron finds himself in something of a bind. To get the reforms and the renegotiation package that he needs to be able to persuade his party and the country to vote to remain in the EU – believed to be Cameron's preferred position – he must secure the agreement of his 27 EU partners. He cannot simply make demands: re-negotiation, as the term implies, does necessitate *negotiation* and a degree of diplomacy. Margaret Thatcher banging her handbag on the table in her bid to get Britain's money back in the 1980s might have worked once but it is not something that can be easily repeated.

The Prime Minister now understands the need for bilateral discussions, as do both the Foreign Secretary and Chancellor, who are also part of the renegotiating team with the PM, and the long-serving Europe Minister, David Lidington. But for Cameron to secure the deal he wants and needs, he must appear credible. If the UK is already seen to be in the European departure lounge, it will be almost impossible to secure a meaningful outcome.

Boris Johnson might exhort the Prime Minister that he has to be willing to leave the EU and make that position clear in order to get the best deal but that way lies the danger of alienating those partners Britain needs to woo in order to get reform. David Cameron has to show the 27 that he is serious about remaining, in order for them to feel it's worthwhile negotiating. Yet at home Cameron has to show his party and the country that he is serious about reform.

The reforms that the government is seeking in the renegotiation have to go far enough to win over those in Cameron's own party who are undecided or who are minded to vote to leave the EU, while not going so far that he alienates pro-Europeans. While this latter danger could affect some in his

own party, it is more likely that some possible reforms could put off those on the left. In this regard, the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader means yet another challenge for David Cameron in this high-stakes game. Corbyn - whose views on Britain's EU membership seem 'fluid' to put it mildly - suggested he would not give the Prime Minister 'a blank cheque' on the renegotiations. He initially implied that he might not support remaining in the EU if the deal the PM secured were inadequate, or more likely if they go in a direction that appears to undermine 'social Europe', including workers' rights. However, Corbyn has since said that if Cameron gets a poor deal it would be important to remain in the EU in order to rectify matters, thereby offering some hope to pro-Europeans that Labour will support the campaign to remain, even if they don't endorse the outcome of the renegotiation.

The reforms need to be meaningful too in order to avoid the allegations coming from the Scottish National Party - itself strongly in favour of Scotland remaining in the EU - and some other pro-Europeans that the renegotiation is just sham. Such claims weaken Cameron's scope for coming back with his renegotiation deal, likely in December or early 2016, and persuading those undecided or soft Eurosceptics that he has got a good enough deal to be able to recommend staying in.

Cameron has a difficult balancing act. The decision to try to renegotiate and then have a referendum is a high-risk strategy. It is a one-shot game. The idea put forward by London Mayor Boris Johnson that people should vote 'no' in order to secure a better deal and then vote to remain in a second poll simply will not run. (Indeed, the changed wording of the referendum question to 'Should the UK remain in the EU or leave the EU?' may weaken his message, moving as it does from the yes/no options.) Our partners in Europe want us to remain but not at any price. They are tired of Britain's apparent disengagement. If the UK votes to leave, that decision would be reluctantly accepted by our 27 partners in Europe.

David Cameron will deliver the long-awaited referendum. Whether he can also deliver meaningful reform that will hold his party together and secure Britain's place in the European Union is less clear.

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