

Britain's "Love Hate Relationship" with the EU: David Cameron's Gimmick, "Negotiating Cycles" with Brussels

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It's a bit like threatening to walk out of a marriage of four decades because your husband doesn't put the top on the toothpaste tube."

Mark Leonard, European Council on Foreign Relations Director, New York Times, Nov 10, 2015

The European Union has its problems. These may, in the long term, prove terminal, unless internal, and dramatic reform take place across its various institutions. The critique of Europe from Britain has, however, often been framed as that of Britannia against the tyranny of continental ambitions, the dark cloud of land-based despotism. This version has had its moments. Prime Minister David Cameron's rather insipid efforts to renegotiate Britain's relationship with the EU is certainly not one of them.

The issue of Europe - and more precisely, the EU - has been at the forefront of his populist platform. He had repeatedly promised, to the scorn of many of his European counterparts, a change in the relationship with Brussels that will be palatable to the British voter, and the EU establishment.

On the referendum planned for 2017, Cameron has stressed Churchillian themes of destiny and opportunity. "You will hold this country's destiny in your hands; this is a huge decision for our country, perhaps the biggest we will make in our lifetimes."

The demands cover a range of specifics. They include a proposed safeguard against discrimination based on currency, with Britain continuing to treasure its pound. They highlight a fundamental cessation of the principle of seeking "ever closer union" with the EU, which is actually misread - the aim of the foundation documents suggest "an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe." The familiar ground of cutting red tape is also pitched.

None of those proposals seem particularly startling. The real thrust lies behind the language of isolating, and insulating Britain from institutions that have done to regulate Albion's own tendencies to tyranny. A desire to run roughshod on human rights, for instance, has been frustrated by European legal institutions.

Perhaps the greatest of red herring Cameron has thrown in is the supposed problems posed by migrants. This has been the classic Tory platform, taking the baton to the poor and desperate, while emphasising the element of emergency. The EU might be a

bureaucratically ridden entity, stacked to the rafters with regulations, but it does have one fundamental principle going for it: the principle of free movement.

The principle of mobility has openly been defied by several states keen on seeking a rather different EU. Hungary, with a government fearing the Islamicisation of Europe, has been the noisiest in this regard, blatantly sealing its borders with razor wire. Countries such as Denmark have imposed controls on movement.

Cameron has taken his queue in this regard, running down refugees, and migrants more broadly speaking, at key moments of political debate. Benefits (and here, the wording is important) for low income workers would be restricted for up to four years after arriving in Britain, which is tantamount to saying that the country will accept labour without humanitarian assurances. (The policy is actually suggested as a deterrent.) Cameron's figures on this, those claiming that 40 percent of recent European Economic Area migrants received an average of around £6,000 a year of in-work benefits, seem suspect.

European negotiators may end up pushing Cameron in the corner on this one, suggesting that any equivalent cut or reduction in benefits for European nationals should be accompanied by similar treatment for British employees.

Cameron has already anticipated this. "I understand how difficult some of these welfare issues are for some member states, and I'm open to different ways of dealing with the issue."

The proposal makes a nonsense of the non-discriminatory principle of the European zone, notably in terms of labour and movement. Other European leaders have been conciliatory, if only because they doubt Cameron can pull it off. In German Chacellor Angela Merkel's words, "we want to work through these proposals with the aim of working towards a solution."

But even the welfare demand is not seen as enough by those who wish for a breezy, total exit. Nigel Lawson, former Conservative chancellor, thought Cameron's suggestions "disappointingly unambitious." Emphasis has been made on superficial change over substantive reform. And if there is a prime minister who has shown himself to be prone to shameless gimmickry, Cameron is it.

Such negotiating cycles with Brussels may prove to be pure measures of calculation, designed to play to appropriate home audiences while not disrupting the status quo. It is hard to see any giving in on the issue of reconstituting the EU's internal market, which is governed by doctrinaires and dogmatists. Should that happen, other states will also make noises, as, indeed, they already are. In that case, Britain will need the support of other Europeans for the project of reform, rather than a specifically British model of change.

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