

## **Fraser Cameron**

# **How long will the UK Remain in the EU?**

### **Introduction**

Will the UK still be a member of the EU in five years? The answer is almost certainly yes. David Cameron has taken a big gamble in promising a referendum but the result, if it comes to a referendum, will most likely be a vote to stay in. In 1975 polls showed a majority of Britons wanting to leave the club they had just joined but in the end there was a convincing victory for the yes campaign. The British are renowned for their pragmatism and a well-run yes campaign leading up to the 2017 vote will expose the many myths propagated by the no side.

It is of course by no means certain that Cameron will win the general election in 2015. The Labour Party is leading in the polls and it, and the Liberal Democrats, are opposed to a referendum. Even if he were to win an outright majority, Cameron would face an EU unlikely to allow him to cherry-pick from the integration menu. The UK already benefits from various opt-outs including the euro and Schengen. Further opt outs in justice and home affairs are likely to happen as a result of the exemptions the UK secured in the Lisbon Treaty. But with some goodwill from EU leaders, Cameron could gain some cosmetic changes, as happened in 1975, thus allowing him to campaign for the UK to remain in the EU. This would not satisfy the die-hard euro-sceptics, so a split in the Conservative Party could well be the result.

### **Domestic motives**

The motive for Cameron promising a referendum in the next parliament is all to do with domestic politics, and especially the situation in the Conservative Party. If he had not made this commitment then the Conservatives would have faced a serious challenge from the xenophobic, anti-European UKIP party which has been gaining votes by demanding an in-out referendum. Up to a hundred Conservative MPs hold views similar to UKIP and if Cameron had not promised a referendum he could have faced a challenge to his leadership. In taking his decision, the views of European leaders were simply not taken into account nor was there any serious analysis of how and what he might seek to re-negotiate.

Europe as an issue has dogged British politics for half a century. Although both Conservative and Labour governments had sought British membership in the 1960s their applications for accession were vetoed by the French. When Britain finally joined in 1973, under a Conservative government led by Edward Heath, the Labour Party opposed the deal. In order to paper over cracks in his party, Harold Wilson, the Labour leader promised a referendum after re-negotiating the terms of accession. Six months before the referendum in 1974, opinion polls showed two-thirds wanting to leave. But a coalition of Conservatives, the majority of the Labour Party, the Liberal Party, business and the unions led to a 70-30 vote to stay in after Britain gained only minor changes.

Since 1975, the two parties have both suffered further splits on Europe. Margaret Thatcher injected a virulent form of euro-scepticism into the Conservatives by demanding her money back and attacking the Brussels bureaucrats. Her successor, John Major, struggled and failed to control the rising tide of euro-sceptics in the party.

Meanwhile the Labour Party had fought the 1983 election under Michael Foot on a promise of withdrawal from the EU. His successor, Neil Kinnock, ditched this policy but still failed to win in 1992. Tony Blair then pulled the party towards a highly pro-EU direction but failed to persuade his finance minister and arch-rival, Gordon Brown, to join the euro.

After losing three elections the Conservatives turned to the suave and telegenic David Cameron as their saviour. In order to appease the euro-sceptics, he promised to pull the Conservatives out of the European Peoples Party. Cameron's attempt to move the Conservatives to the centre almost succeeded. But the 2010 election resulted in a hung parliament with the Conservatives having to rely on the pro-EU Liberal Democrats for support to form a government.

So what are the chances of Cameron's gamble succeeding? In the short-term he has bought himself time with the euro-sceptic wing of the party and the largely anti-European media. But before he can organise a referendum he must first win the next election in 2015. Given the dismal performance of the economy there is little to suggest the Conservatives can win an outright majority or even form another coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Indeed most of them would prefer a coalition with the Labour Party under Ed Miliband. Another important referendum also takes place in 2014 with the pro-European and anti-Conservative Scots being asked to vote for or against independence. The result of this referendum could have major implications for the future of British politics.

### **Cameron's speech**

Although pitched to a domestic audience Cameron's speech was not entirely negative. He explained that the EU was changing and it would take some time for Britain to negotiate a new deal. He urged eurozone leaders to deal with the debt crisis, called for a more competitive EU and said the gap between the EU and citizens must be narrowed. He attacked the EU's lack of focus, out-dated spending priorities and sclerotic decision-making process. He wanted to see a more flexible Europe where powers could be repatriated to Member States. Cameron made clear he wanted the UK to remain inside a reformed EU. The UK could not escape its geography, the EU would continue to affect the UK whether in or out, the Single Market was vital for British business, and British influence in world capitals was stronger by being inside the EU. He rejected the Swiss and Norwegian examples as not fitting for the UK.

The reactions to the speech were predictable. UKIP was pleased at the referendum promise but said the vote should be now. His Conservative eurosceptic supporters were also pleased and made no secret of their aims in any negotiations. They want Britain to opt out of the common agricultural policy, the common fisheries policy, environment policy and a raft of social and economic policies including the working time directive. Boris Johnson, the mayor of London and a possible successor to Cameron, suggested that the UK would be better off if just in the Single Market.

European leaders were mainly critical of the speech and Cameron's general approach, a mix of threats and blackmail. Angela Merkel was the most supportive stating that she agreed with many of Cameron's aims, making the EU more flexible and competitive. But she also argued that many of these changes can be done within the existing framework. The Swedish, Dutch and Irish prime ministers have made similar noises. But no-one has said

that they will agree to cherry-picking. As Guido Westerwelle said, if allowed for one country where would it end? Even the UK's traditional central European allies have been unwilling to support the UK. Poland, for example, has seen the benefits of a cooperative approach towards the EU and is scathing about Britain's attitude on the budget.

The United States has also entered the debate warning that the UK's influence in the world depends very much on its membership of the EU. Cameron recognises this but as one advisor put it 'Obama does not have a vote in the Conservative Party'.

Meanwhile the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats are lying low. Both argue that it makes little sense to propose a referendum when the EU is in the process of fundamental change as a result of the sovereign debt crisis. The EU could look very different in a few years if the proposed banking union is followed by a fiscal union. There would then be inevitable pressure for a political union. But both parties may come under pressure as the election approaches to match the Cameron commitment.

## Conclusion

Whatever the makeup of the EU in 2017 it is unlikely that a majority of the British people would vote to leave. The EU has never been top of the issues they worry about: the economy, jobs, education, the health service and immigration are bigger concerns. Although some polls have shown a majority would vote to leave the EU there has been almost no campaigning on the yes side. The yes campaigners are now getting organised with business and the City mobilising resources. Although the press is hostile there is likely to be a similar coalition of forces arguing to remain in the EU as there was in 1975. The result will not be so clear cut as 70-30 but a yes vote is more likely than unlikely. The question will then be whether the euro-sceptics accept the result – or will the EU virus continue to split British political parties?

**Fraser Cameron** is Director of the EU-Asia Centre, a Senior Advisor at the European Policy Centre (EPC), and an adjunct professor at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. Born in Scotland, Dr Cameron was educated at the University of St Andrews where he received an honours degree, Master of Arts, in Political Science and History (1970). He then obtained a PhD in International Relations from the University of Cambridge (1973). He was a Research Fellow at the University of Hamburg (1973-74) and a Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Kent (1974-75). From 1975-89, he was a member of the British Diplomatic Service. Dr Cameron joined the European Commission in 1990 and was closely involved in policy issues related to the external relations of the EU. From 1999 to 2001, he was the Political Counsellor in the EU Delegation in Washington DC. He joined the EPC on secondment from the Commission in 2002 and retired from the Commission in 2006. Dr Cameron is the author of numerous books and articles on European and international affairs, has lectured widely in all continents and is a well-known media commentator. He is an advisor to the BBC and to the UK government's Higher Education Panel on Europe.



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