The UK's relationship with Europe is too complex to be settled by a simple 'in/out' referendum

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How effective would a referendum on Britain's EU membership be at settling the issue long-term? **Andrew Glencross** *writes that regardless of the outcome of the referendum, it is likely that the question of Europe would remain centre stage in British politics.*

A referendum on EU membership is increasingly seen by the British public as the best way to settle the vast number of political issues EU membership raises. A recent Chatham House/YouGov survey shows 60 per cent of Britons support the proposed popular vote to determine the country's relationship with the EU.

Unsurprisingly, political parties are also keen on the idea. David Cameron has promised an 'in/out' referendum if the Conservatives win the May General Election. The Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) would make hay with such a vote, while Labour leader Ed Miliband has pledged that under his watch there would be "no transfer of powers" to the EU without an 'in/out referendum' – a repeat of a promise made in the 2010 Liberal Democrat manifesto. This policy convergence is nevertheless puzzling as the resort to direct democracy over the EU question is unlikely to resolve the UK's relationship with European integration or prove particularly cathartic for British politics.

The perils of letting the people decide

David Cameron's tactic is to assuage doubts over Europe by renegotiating the terms of EU membership prior to asking the people to decide. The precedent for this gambit is the Wilson government's attempt to alter the terms of British membership of the European Economic Community after the General Election in February 1974.

Although the UK was unable to change the EEC treaty, the government was able to present a narrative about a successful renegotiation based on the creation of a regional fund, a budget correction mechanism, and improved access to New Zealand food imports. Despite internal divisions within the Labour cabinet, the referendum campaign ended successfully for the government, with 67 per cent of voters opting to keep Britain in the EEC. This outcome represented a marked swing as Gallup polling had shown a 55 per cent majority for leaving the EEC in January 1975.

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Polls today similarly show that the British electorate is more inclined to support the EU on the basis of renegotiated terms of membership. The problem for any politician seeking to satisfy this demand is that – with little fanfare and devoid of domestic public recognition – the UK has already profoundly shaped European integration since the end of the Cold War.

Enlargement and expanded foreign policy powers were key British objectives, while in other important areas the UK now benefits from a bespoke system of opt-outs (Schengen and the euro) and special treatment (e.g. the double majority voting system of the European Banking Authority). In these circumstances there is little room for accommodating new British demands, especially those that go against fundamental EU principles such as free movement of people.

The probability of desultory re-negotiation helps explain why Eurosceptic Conservatives openly envisage an alternative arrangement, as in the "generous exit" mooted by Boris Johnson. However, this expectation rests on a

misunderstanding of the constraints currently facing the UK as an EU member state. As the Centre for European Reform has pointed out, analysis of product market regulation reveals that the UK already has less red tape than the US and the least in the EU apart from the Netherlands.

Hence the EU already affords flexibility for the UK, meaning that Brexit cannot suddenly open the floodgates for de-regulation. Money-wise the UK would have to contribute to the EU's coffers – as Norway and Switzerland do – in return for access to the single market. Substantial savings from leaving the costly Common Agricultural Policy would inevitably be offset by having to funnel taxpayer money to support farmers and rural communities.

Consequently, withdrawal from the EU implies going back to the negotiating table so as to design a way to retain terms of trade with European countries better than those offered simply by WTO rules. Accessing the single market from the outside also carries implications for free trade deals with third countries, as the UK would have to stick to certain regulatory standards originating from Brussels. Even as a non-member state, therefore, Britain would be heavily engaged with a range of European policy issues. Arguably, then, integration could become a more politicised and prominent issue after a British exit.

What is certain is that Brexit is a very realistic outcome of any referendum campaign on EU membership. A pro-EU campaign faces significant obstacles that include a lack of headline-grabbing renegotiation goals, a querulous media environment, and populist opposition from Eurosceptic Conservatives as well as UKIP.

In addition, an in/out referendum constitutes a *de facto* UK constitutional debate. In 1975 the worry was that Scottish voters would reject the EEC (polls initially showed a 16 point lead for withdrawal in Scotland). Four decades on, the Scottish National Party is firmly attached to EU membership – so much so that SNP First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has called for a Scottish veto on a UK-wide Brexit result. A majority vote to leave the EU would inevitably re-open divisions within the Union that were so evident in the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.

Hence the hope that allowing the people to decide the EU question will "heal many old sores and have a cleansing effect on politics", as former Prime Minister John Major recently claimed, appears misplaced. Even a successful Yes campaign is unlikely to prove cathartic as the *status quo* settlement is bound to remain contentious. EU free movement principles will remain pertinent to the populist politicisation of immigration. The possibility of further EU widening to include the Balkans or even Turkey means that this strand of Euroscepticism still has a long shelf life.

The electoral temptation to make the equation between Europe and migration only increases the chances that the Conservatives would find it impossible to regroup after a referendum campaign in which the party (like Labour in 1975) split into Europhile and Eurosceptic factions. As illustrated by the defection of MP Mark Reckless in 2014, there is a thin line of demarcation around the edges between the Tories and UKIP. A popular vote thus has the potential to reconfigure the centre-right. In this context, it is risky to assume that by settling the Europe question via direct democracy the Conservatives necessarily improve their chances of remaining united.

Politicians of various stripes package an EU referendum as offering a simple and decisive resolution to a long-standing policy headache. In reality, direct democracy is not a panacea, especially in the event of a decision to leave the EU. Inside or outside the club – as Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey know – European integration is not a process from which the UK can remain completely aloof. Policy issues arising from relations with the EU cannot be resumed to a simple 'in/out' question and nor should they. Ultimately, the Europe question is one that will endure and

remain an inherent part of the British political conversation.

This article is based on a longer paper in the March 2015 issue *of International Affairs, the Chatham House journal*

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