

David Cameron's EU speech – our experts react

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Today, David Cameron gave his long-awaited speech on the future of the UK's relationship with the EU. We asked EUROPP's expert contributors for their immediate reactions and their thoughts on the speech's implications for the UK and Europe.



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Cameron is deeply deluded if he thinks that a referendum will settle the European debate for all time

Andrew Duff MEP – *European Federalists*

That there will be a referendum in Britain is hardly a surprise. Since 2011, EU referendums have been entrenched in Britain's fragile constitution. Nor is the timetable new. The constitutional Convention cannot start until spring 2015. The Convention will be followed by an intergovernmental conference. Then national ratification procedures will start across the EU. Several countries will have a referendum. All have to agree. What matters is the nature of the package deal to be reached in those negotiations. The British problem will only form relatively minor part of that negotiation.



The primary purpose of the Convention will be to install a federal economic government of a fiscal union. It is that federal treaty on which the UK people will be asked to vote not the current state of play.

The EU which comes out of the present crisis will be very much more integrated than it is now. This gives each political party in Britain the chance to come out in favour of a strong united democratic Europe providing stability and prosperity at home and leadership for peace and justice in world affairs.

Mr Cameron displays alarming levels of ignorance and prejudice about the European Union. But he will now learn how the EU really works. In particular, if he wants to recast existing EU laws he needs to win the support of MEPs. So far his attitude to the European Parliament has been marked more by contempt

than by respect. Lastly, the prime minister is also deeply deluded if he thinks that a referendum will settle the European debate for all time. It won't.

If negotiations are seen to fail there will likely be options made available to the UK that stop short of Brexit

Simon Glendinning – *Reader in European Philosophy in the European Institute*



There are two issues to consider in the wake of Cameron's Europe speech. First, the "vision" of the EU that Cameron set out to defend. This was a genuinely pro-EU contribution, alive both to the UK's historical connections with Europe and alive as well to the fact that the UK impact on the future shape of the EU is likely to be limited in view of developments in the Eurozone. I think that the vision of the EU mapped out by Cameron fairly represents a mainstream view in the UK: the EU's ambition should be to avoid the twin threats of both bureaucratic centralisation and petty nationalism in Europe.

The second issue concerns the "politics" of Cameron's pro-EU strategy, and here the jury is still out. There are real concerns that if Brussels simply says no to what it may call "cherry picking", Cameron's strategy – which seems to place a huge bet on achieving some sort of credible or at least arguable "repatriation of powers" – will leave him no option but the Brexit door. In the end, however, the first issue is the more significant. Events and developments in the Eurozone have made a reassessment of the UK's place in the EU all but unavoidable, and if negotiations are seen to fail there will likely be options made available to the UK that stop short of Brexit.

As a marriage partner scorned once too many by threats of infidelity, the EU is giving Britain a much colder shoulder than it expected

Robert Hancké – *LSE European Institute*



The cat is out of the bag. David Cameron's call for an in or out referendum prior to renegotiating (or, at least, trying to renegotiate) the terms of British EU membership is a classic ploy in international diplomacy. Political scientists immediately recognized this tactic as a 'two-level game'. The British prime minister effectively said to his European neighbours 'Give me what I want, else I cannot defend the position at home of staying in the EU', and used the referendum as a hard device to force their hand. But Cameron seems to have overlooked one crucial part of the two-level game: the tactic works best, possibly even only, if the other side is basically very happy with the arrangement. And until very recently, there was no doubt that the rest of the EU preferred Britain in – some for reasons of ideological closeness around a wide but shallow union, others simply because an EU without the UK makes no sense.

Thus, each time Britain asked for a slightly different treatment, vowing it was sorry to do so but was left no choice because of the political and media situation in London, the other EU partners complied. But now, as a marriage partner scorned once too many by threats of infidelity, the EU is giving Britain a much colder shoulder than it expected. And with that, the two-level game tactic unravels: the referendum at home, which was supposed to be France and Germany's problem, has suddenly become a problem for David Cameron the moment Hollande, Merkel and leaders of a host of other countries told him that an EU a la carte was out of the question. Sometimes you wish that politicians had at the very least a rudimentary training in political science. This is one of those times.

A public debate about Europe, but when?

Damian Chalmers - *LSE European Institute and Department of Law*



The Prime Minister's invitation for a national debate about the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union is a valuable and timely one. All relationships, even political ones, need revisiting if they are to be sustained. It is over forty years since this one was revisited. Both parties have changed considerably in that time. However, it is not clear when the debate is to take place. Or even if it will take place at all....

The bottom line is that, if all else fails, the Conservative manifesto will ask for a mandate to renegotiate a new settlement with the other Member States. An 'in/out' referendum will be held on UK membership of the Union with the government recommendation depending on the outcome of the negotiations. In the Prime Minister's speech, this is, however, only a back-up strategy. His preference is for his suggested reforms to be adopted by the Union as a whole. He, therefore, calls for general treaty revision to take place, presumably preceded by an IGC. It is only if this fails that he will seek a special settlement for the United Kingdom.

However, the dates being mooted for such an IGC are 2015 at the earliest. With negotiations and then possible referenda in the different Member States, it could be 2017 until we know the answer to whether a 'British settlement' is needed. Furthermore, it is not clear if this new Treaty would attract a referendum. For the British, at least, it would not be extending EU competencies, EU institutional powers or QMV so would seem to fall under the exception in section 4(4) European Union 2011. Even if this were not the case, what would the referendum be about? The new Treaty: in which case you could always vote 'no' (as the Irish, Danes, Dutch and French have done) for a better one. Or is it about the end of EU membership?

The second challenge is the *Balance of Competences Review*. Looking at the costs and benefit of membership across all EU policies, this is not due to finish until the end of 2014. It makes little sense to formulate a view until the end of this exercise with the government having invested so much time and political capital in it.

Even within this timetable, it is optimistic to think detailed overall assessment will be possible to feed into different manifestos in a way that allows considered public debate of the review and debate within the political parties. This scenario may furthermore be optimistic with ambush opportunities for the Lib Dems to delay the Review, and thereby claim the Conservatives do not have an evidence-based policy.

There is implicit acknowledgment of this in the speech. Negotiations are only to take place after the next election and presumably the British government would therefore not have to take a view and formulate a negotiating position until then. However, this raises, in turn, real questions about the Conservative manifesto. Is it going to be a demand to repatriate some competencies but with the proviso that 'we don't know which ones yet'? This generality will be hard to sustain both from internal party tensions and the scrutiny of the press and other political parties. Most likely it will be ad hoc cherry-picking of the document on the fly to ward off UKIP voters in the run-in to 2015. This will in turn make any negotiation of any British settlement with the other Member States that bit harder as these react to any perceived political opportunism.

The most important question is how the other political parties in the UK will respond

Simon Usherwood - *University of Surrey*

For a speech with so much hype and trailing, this largely failed to meet even the very limited thresholds set out by both pro- and anti-EU groups. In the end, Cameron's instincts as a politician – to hedge, to work with what is possible – prevailed. For this, we must be thankful that British EU policy hasn't been irrevocably set on a path to exit. Nonetheless, to pretend that this is anything more than a glorified handling statement is wishful thinking. Tory backbenchers – the key drivers of policy in this Parliament – have repeatedly demonstrated an unwillingness to settle for anything less than withdrawal. Since the speech offers nothing more than an intention to renegotiate (itself highly doubtful), for many MPs there will be a desire to see more, and in short order.



However, the main question will be the response of other political parties. If Labour – currently most likely to form the next government – feels compelled to respond with a matching offer, then this is a meaningful advance. One might assume that this is only going to happen if the heat comes off Cameron and he sees a big boost in the polls (questionable, given the low salience of the EU). Until then, the working assumption will be that the Tories will be more inclined to return to 1990s-style in-fighting, with all the consequences that had for the party.

There is little point in saying ‘no’ to the EU if we can’t put forward a legitimate alternative

Stuart A Brown – *LSE Public Policy Group*



If anything other than an in/out referendum had been offered then the reaction from Eurosceptics would have been severe. However there is little point in saying ‘no’ to the EU if we can’t put forward a legitimate alternative. Voting to leave the EU would raise a number of different questions for which there are no easy answers. Exiting the single market is simply not an option, so the issue would then turn to how we secure our continued participation. Following the Norwegian model of implementing vast swathes of EU legislation, without either UK representatives in the Council or the European Parliament being part of discussions, is neither democratic nor in the country’s wider economic interest.

While a vote to leave the EU would be portrayed as a victory for direct democracy and grassroots campaigning, the reality could hardly be more different. It would generate complex negotiations over the UK’s participation in the single market which would be driven almost entirely by elite representatives. The only way in which the referendum could achieve its desired aim of settling the European question is if the two options presented to the electorate were comprehensive and credible. However Cameron’s strategy essentially involves putting his “renegotiated settlement” up against a concept which is so vague as to be meaningless. Until we define exactly what leaving the EU entails, it’s impossible for a referendum to give any clear indication of what the British public actually want from their relationship with Europe.

Cameron’s speech might be a game changer for the Scottish independence campaign

Arno van der Zwet - *University of Strathclyde*

The speech has the potential to change the relationship between London and Brussels, but does it also have an impact on relations between London and Edinburgh? Of course, a speech of this magnitude brings many opportunities for political quipping, but to what extent will the ‘No Camp’ and ‘Yes Camp’ in the Scottish independence campaign be affected by the speech?

For those campaigning for a ‘no’ vote in the Scottish independence referendum, Cameron’s speech brings some profound difficulties. First, the No Camp, including Cameron, has long argued that the SNP should have called a quick referendum when it won an unexpected outright majority in the Scottish Parliament in 2011. This would have avoided unnecessary political and economic uncertainty. The five year run up period for a European in/out referendum will lead to similar accusations and therefore inconsistencies on the part of the No Camp. Second, one key argument of the No Camp has been that Scottish independence equates with a form of narrow nationalism and isolationism (its slogan is ‘Better Together’). This will be difficult to maintain when the British position in Europe appears so antagonistic. Third, The Conservatives are a marginal force in Scottish Politics and it really is the Labour Party that leads the No Camp. In many ways they have been saddled with a problem that is not of their own making. Cameron’s position will emphasise the disunity within the camp; not so much on the preservation of British Union but on what the position of that Union in the world will be.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) is the main face of the Yes Camp. It adopted its ‘Independence in Europe’ strategy in the early 1990s, but the sound-bite has been less popular in recent years. Part of this has to do with the natural ageing process of slogans and mantras, but there are other factors that have made talking about Europe difficult. First, despite some signs that the rescue operation of the eurozone may have been successful, the eurocrisis lies fresh in the electorate’s memory. Talk of being in the EU is tainted and the argument that the EU can provide security and continuity for an independent Scotland has perhaps become less convincing. Second, the Scottish electorate is no more pro-Europe (or equally Eurosceptic) than their neighbours south of the border: in the 1975 referendum, 10 per cent fewer Scots voted for membership than did so in England. As a campaigning issue the EU can hardly be seen as a vote winner. Third, once we scratch the surface of the SNP’s ‘Independence in Europe’ headline we see that many in the party have profound concerns about themes such as the Common Fisheries Policy, the euro, the democratic deficit, and closer fiscal integration, which also makes the argument less

convincing. These issues point towards a discontent that requires renegotiation. An unequivocally Europhile stance is neither convincing nor electorally rewarding.

The EU referendum takes place after the Scottish independence referendum; had it been the other way around the effects could have been profound. In the short term Cameron's speech will have an impact on the independence campaign and create difficulties for the No Camp, who will have to re-examine their arguments and strategy. However, structural difficulties of the Yes Camp's position are not changed by Cameron's speech. It has changed nothing in relation to the uncertainties the eurocrisis brings or the existing Euroscepticism in Scotland. On the other hand, the route taken by Cameron has rightly been described as a gamble and the process will be difficult to control politically.

Making the reasons and areas for re-negotiation more explicit should make the average British citizen very wary and uncomfortable about this whole proposition.

Bart Cammaerts – *LSE Media and Communications*

While it is a slight coincidence that Cameron gave his long awaited EU-speech in the heart of the City (given that he was planning to deliver it in the Netherlands), it is nevertheless telling. Cameron hinges his bets on an uncertain renegotiation of Britain's membership to the EU, which should, according to Eurosceptics, amount to a significantly different relationship between the UK and the EU as a whole.



Besides the fact that other member states already indicated that a Europe *à la carte* is simply unacceptable (see statements of [Laurent Fabius](#), [Guido Westerwelle](#) and [others](#)), what is missing from Cameron's speech is a more explicit and clearly articulated rationale as to why this re-calibration is needed in the first place, and a reference to the type of policy areas where the UK would like to repatriate powers from Brussels. What exactly are the 'irritating excrescences of the European Union' ([according](#) to Boris Johnson) which the Eurosceptics keep talking about?

If we briefly dissect Eurosceptic discourse as to why a Brexit is warranted it becomes apparent that the 'repatriation of powers' from Brussels is in fact a code word for a set of highly divisive and nasty right wing policies. The type of 'excrescences' Eurosceptics typically refer to and want to withdraw from are: harmonized labour laws and minimum social standards protecting employee rights, privacy laws, human rights legislation relating to civic rights, rights of migrants, of asylum seekers or of other vulnerable groups in society, health and safety regulations, as well as a much more stringent regulatory regime for the financial and banking sector (which would impact the City of London). In other words, making the reasons and areas for re-negotiation more explicit should make the average British citizen very wary and uncomfortable indeed about this whole proposition.

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