

Fear of British EU exit prompts US/German warnings

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Prime Minister David Cameron has been forced to bring forward a keynote speech on Britain's relations with the European Union after his suggestion that a referendum could be held on British membership caused a firestorm internationally.

Cameron was expected to clarify his position in a speech on January 22, but it has been brought forward to Friday after unprecedented public criticisms by US and German politicians.

In September, Cameron had stated that any changes to existing EU treaties would require "fresh consent" from the British people. Although the word referendum was not used, his comment was taken to imply such a move.

His remarks were aimed at placating the sizeable euro-sceptic wing inside the Conservative Party, but they only inflamed tensions. In November, Cameron suffered his largest parliamentary defeat over his government's support for a freeze, as opposed to a cut, in the EU budget, with more than 50 Tory MPs rebelling. This was followed by several by-elections in December which saw Conservative candidates beaten into third and fourth place by the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP).

It is against this background that Cameron promised to clarify his position on the EU. While supporting continued membership of the bloc, Cameron was expected to explain that he would use negotiations on changes to EU treaties to press for the "repatriation" of certain powers from Brussels to London. If the Conservatives were re-elected in 2014, the new terms would be put to a referendum, possibly in 2018.

Even with all these hypotheticals, the mere suggestion of a referendum has been enough to elicit a hostile response from Britain's major partners and from big business.

First up was Philip Gordon, US assistant secretary of state for European affairs. In a barely veiled threat made in London, Gordon said that Washington "welcome[s] an outward-looking European Union with Britain in it. We benefit when the EU is unified, speaking with a single voice, and focused on our shared interests around the world and in Europe."

"We want to see a strong British voice in that European Union," he said. "That is in the American interest."

The following day, Germany's Gunther Krichbaum of Chancellor Angela Merkel's ruling Christian Democratic Union and chairman of the German parliament's EU Affairs Committee, made a press briefing at the German Embassy in London. Krichbaum said that renegotiation of "the Lisbon Treaty is first of all legally impossible." Any attempt would, in addition, create a dangerous precedent, he said, arguing "it is neither wise nor useful to open a Pandora's Box."

Questioning whether "it is wise to carry out a referendum," he warned that the UK should not try "blackmailing" the other 26-member states and that a British exit from the EU "would be an economic disaster" for the UK.

"Britain leaving [the EU] would weaken the European idea, but it would weaken Britain's position in the world more," he warned.

On Monday, Pier Luigi Bersani, leader of Italy's Democratic Party—the favoured candidate to lead a new coalition government after next month's general election—argued that Britain must not be allowed to "paralyse" the EU and prevent efforts to "further integrate" the eurozone.

Cameron's stance has strong opposition from finance capital and big business in the UK. The Confederation of British Industry has warned against "throw[ing] the baby out with the bathwater". In a New Year's message, CBI head John Cridland insisted that the only way that the UK could successfully pursue new free trade agreements internationally, especially with the US, was "on an EU-wide basis."

Cameron has also been attacked by his Liberal Democrat coalition partners and from within the Conservative Party, with the former deputy prime minister Lord Heseltine describing a referendum as "ill-advised".

The Labour Party is positioning itself as a vociferous opponent of a referendum. Labour leader Ed Miliband condemned Cameron's position as "incredibly dangerous"

and “sleepwalking us towards the exit”. Denouncing it as “the wrong thing to do” and “not in the national interest”, Miliband refused to commit Labour to a referendum at any time.

Subsequently it was announced that Tory minister Kenneth Clarke is to join Labour’s Peter Mandelson in the launch of a “patriotic fightback for British leadership” in the cross-party Centre for British Influence through Europe (CBIE).

There are several aspects to this reaction.

In the first place it is indicative of the extreme nervousness as to the fate of the euro and the EU. For all the talk that “Europe has turned a corner”, etc., the reality is one of growing recessionary trends within Europe and the world economy.

Connected to this, the powers-that-be are well aware of the social powder-keg building across the continent.

The EU was created as an instrument of big business interests in Europe to fashion a trade bloc against its major competitors through privatisation and de-regulation. In response to the global capitalist crisis, which began in 2008, it has been the means for transferring massive losses by the banks onto state balance sheets and for imposing savage austerity measures.

Greece—the victim of five successive austerity programmes—has been the laboratory for this. Jobs, wages, pensions and social provision has been slashed to the bone. Even as millions have been plunged into destitution and the economy thrown even more sharply into reverse, European and world leaders sadistically demand even greater cuts.

A similar situation is being replicated in Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Italy. But as Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel made clear in her Christmas message, this is to be extended across the entire continent. Warning that welfare programmes are unsustainable, Merkel stressed that Europe must meet the new standards of international competitiveness being set in China and India.

This demand for a social counterrevolution against the European working class is fully supported by the British bourgeoisie, which is implementing one of the most draconian austerity packages in Europe.

That is why, even as Cameron demands the renegotiation of certain powers in order to defend British capital against any encroachment on its ill-gotten gains, his government and the ruling elite more broadly support measures for the “closer integration” of the EU—by which they mean establishing the economic, political and state mechanisms necessary to impose mass impoverishment across the continent.

It is this that accounts for the increasing resort to anti-democratic and authoritarian methods by the EU and its respective governments. Repeated mass protests against EU

austerity measures are treated with contempt and indifference. Where the EU and its partner, the International Monetary Fund, are dissatisfied with the progress of a particular government in implementing their demands, they simply install their own unelected candidate as prime minister, as in the case of Mario Monti in Italy and earlier Loukas Papadimos in Greece.

Even the hint of a referendum in the UK, with the likelihood that it could return popular support for a Brexit (British exit from the EU), elicits demands that this must not be allowed under any circumstances.

These events are a further example of how politics is dictated by the interests of a global financial oligarchy. This state of affairs is the outcome of the fact that working people have no independent means of articulating and fighting for their own class interests. In every country, right-wing and even fascistic forces are able to monopolise legitimate opposition to the EU and its reactionary policies because the nominal “left” parties and the trade unions are its most strident defenders and advocates.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Greece where the opposition party SYRIZA, which won significant support for its verbal opposition to austerity, has ruled out any break with the EU. The same policies are upheld by the Left Bloc in Portugal, United Left Alliance in Ireland and the host of pseudo-left tendencies across Europe. They function as a linchpin in the bourgeoisie’s ability to impose austerity, while their criminal association of the “left” with the big business EU is successfully exploited by the extreme right to push its own reactionary, nationalist agenda



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