

UK Conservatives face crisis over referendum on European Union

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British Prime Minister David Cameron is threatening to invoke the Parliament Act, to force a bill on the UK holding a referendum on European Union (EU) membership (UK) onto the statute books.

The move came after the House of Lords last month scuppered a private members bill, moved by Conservative James Wharton, on the issue. It had to take the form of a private members bill as opposed to a government bill because the Liberal Democrats, who are in the coalition with the Conservatives, oppose the terms of a referendum as set out by Cameron. The combined votes of the Liberal Democrats and Labour to stop debating The European Union (Referendum) bill by 180 votes to 130 ensured it ran out of time.

Described as the “nuclear option”, and one intended only to be used on exceptional occasions, the Parliament Act allows the government to force through legislation against the opposition of the Lords.

Cameron had promised to renegotiate British membership of the EU and hold a referendum on the issue by 2017. In this way he hoped to placate a sizeable number of anti-EU backbenchers, as well as see off a growing electoral challenge from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

To this end, Cameron pledged to change the law so that a future government is committed to holding an in-out referendum on EU membership. It was intended that this would enable the Conservatives to argue in this May’s European elections, and in next year’s General Election, that the only way to guarantee a vote on British membership was by backing a Tory government. This would, it was hoped, stymie the haemorrhage of Tory support to UKIP as well as put the Liberal Democrats and Labour on a back foot, as both have opposed a referendum.

The prime minister—as with a substantial section of

the British bourgeoisie and big business—are not in favour of leaving the EU, fearing it would enable the other European powers to formulate policy and legislation detrimental to the interests of British capital. However, under conditions where eurozone members are currently planning measures that directly impinge on those interests—such as agreement for greater harmonisation of fiscal powers in Europe—they are broadly supportive of Cameron’s strategy of using a referendum as a bargaining chip.

The events of the last week showed that Cameron is walking a tightrope.

For months, the prime minister had waited to set out his objectives in a major policy statement on the issue—but on each occasion, the date and venue had to be changed. First, he intended to make his remarks in Europe as a declaration to EU ministers on the need for change, but his plan was reportedly stymied by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as it clashed with the 50th anniversary of the German-Franco Elysée Treaty. It was then postponed again due to the gas pipe attack in Algeria, before finally taking place on January 23 in London.

In his speech, Cameron set out a four-step plan for a referendum. This involved a draft Bill setting up the referendum to be drawn up before the 2015 General Election, a manifesto commitment for any incoming Conservative government to negotiate a “new settlement” with the EU, enabling legislation to be ready in June 2015 in the event of a Tory victory, and the final deadline for a referendum to be by 2017.

Even before the defeat of the private members bill, Cameron’s plans were unravelling.

It was reported that prior to his speech Cameron was contacted by President Barack Obama, who urged that the United States values “a strong UK in a strong

European Union”, according to a White House statement.

Washington has long seen British membership of the EU as a means of establishing its own interests on the continent, as well as helping to undermine the danger of a bloc between major European powers against the US.

While the prime ministers’ office spun the release as support for Cameron’s strategy of keeping Britain in the EU by renegotiating the terms of its membership, it is only one indication of growing tensions and anxiety over the potential consequences of his policy.

French President Francois Hollande threw another spanner in the works during a distinctly frosty Anglo-French summit on January 31. Their meeting, which began at Brize Norton airfield and ended in a local country pub, lasted just a few hours but made clear French opposition to Cameron’s scheme. Hollande said that Cameron’s demands for treaty revisions were “not a priority” for France. Setting out that the French bourgeoisie desire even closer, not looser, integration Hollande said, “France would like the eurozone to be better co-ordinated, better integrated and, if there are going to be amendments to the text, we don’t feel that for the time being they are urgent.”

Hollande reminded the prime minister that any significant treaty revisions would certainly trigger a referendum in France, and potential defeat.

Earlier, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius had reportedly boasted, “The other day I had a meeting with British businessmen and I told them: ‘Listen, if Britain decides to leave Europe, we will roll out the red carpet for you.’”

Against this backdrop, Cameron is pinning his hopes on German backing for treaty changes as a means of keeping Britain in the EU. In contrast to Hollande, Merkel is to be given the red carpet treatment for her upcoming visit to the UK, including plans that she address Parliament and meet the Queen. Thus far Merkel has spoken only vaguely on Cameron’s demands, stating that “Germany, and I personally, want Britain to be an important part and an active member of the European Union.”

“We are prepared to talk about British wishes”, she said, “but we must always bear in mind that other countries have different wishes and we must find a fair compromise.”

For much of the European bourgeoisie, Cameron’s strategy consists of demanding “give us what we want or we are leaving”. Thus, Gunther Krichbaum, German Conservative and chairman of the Bundestag Committee for EU issues, responded to Cameron’s speech committee by saying there was no reason to delay a ballot on British membership as “all the arguments are on the table. There is and can be no renegotiation in Cameron’s sense.”

Former German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said the UK could not “cherry pick”.

“Germany wants an ambitious reform of the economic and monetary union in such decisive issues as the future of our common currency”, he said. “We do not need less, but more integration.”

The *Daily Telegraph* also cited Martin Schulz, the German speaker of the European Parliament, stating, “Prime Minister Cameron with his referendum announcement is playing a dangerous game for tactical, domestic reasons. [He] resembles the sorcerer’s apprentice, who cannot tame the forces that he has conjured...”

According to reports, Cameron is to try and reintroduce the Bill in the next parliamentary session, resorting to the Parliament Act if necessary to get it through. Senior Tories say that the time is probably too limited to enable this to be successful.

Meanwhile, Cameron’s efforts to unify his party with his manoeuvres over EU membership are coming unstuck. Several Tories have demanded the government introduce its own referendum bill, against the Liberal Democrats, which would threaten the coalition. Earlier this month, 95 Conservative backbenchers sought to up the ante, demanding Cameron press for a national veto over EU laws.



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