

UK Tories intensify anti-EU, anti-immigrant rhetoric

Chris Marsden
24 October 2014

Prime Minister David Cameron's anti-immigrant response to the electoral threat posed by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) has put renewed tension in Britain's relationship with the European Union.

This week, Jean-Claude Juncker, the incoming president of the European Commission, rejected Cameron's plan—previewed in the *Sunday Times*—to impose limits on the free movement of people within the EU. Cameron was making a “historic mistake,” he declared at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Juncker said he would like to help secure a “fair deal” with Cameron if he were to put a package of EU reforms forward, but added, “As far as the freedom of movement is concerned ... I do think this is a basic principle of the EU since the very beginning and I am not prepared to change this because if we are destroying the freedom of movement other freedoms will fall in a later cause.”

Juncker's predecessor, José Barroso, this weekend told the BBC's Andrew Marr, “In principle arbitrary caps seem to me in contradiction with European Union rules.” He pointed out that Cameron had cited EU free movement rules when complaining of Spanish restrictions on Gibraltar. “The British citizens have freedom of movement all over Europe,” he said. “There are 700,000 living in Spain.”

Barroso questioned whether the 1.5 to 2 million British citizens living in other EU countries would be able to continue doing so, warning that Britain would have “zero” influence if it left the EU. “Britain is a great country with a great history,” he said. “But it is 60 million people. Do we believe that Britain alone can discuss on an equal footing with the US or with a giant like China?”

Cameron has pledged to make immigration reform the centrepiece of a renegotiation of Britain's

relationship with the EU to be carried out before a referendum vote on Britain's continued membership of the bloc in 2017. According to the Murdoch press, EU migrants would only get a national insurance number for a limited time preventing a permanent move to the UK and them being able to claim benefits. Cameron's declared aim is for net migration to fall below 100,000 a year from almost 250,000 in the year to March.

The Tory response to the EU has been deliberately bellicose. Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond warned that public consent for the EU is “fragile, to put it diplomatically” because the trading bloc has become a “putative superstate.” Continued membership was now the “most important strategic question facing the country.”

He was speaking as a Private Members Bill on an EU referendum passed its second reading in the House of Commons by 293 to 0. Hammond said the bill was “lighting a fire under the European Union” and would force Brussels to grant Britain “meaty and substantial” reforms, because the threat of a British exit is a “very powerful weapon in our armoury.”

Tory chairman Grant Shapps spoke in similar fashion in response to Barroso, whom he described as “only the latest person from Europe to tell us we'll never get what we want.... There are lots of impossible things that we've managed to do in Europe.”

The resort to such brinksmanship, with potentially devastating effect on the UK economy, is a measure of the precarious position Cameron and his government finds itself in.

Externally, it faces a losing a second by-election on November 20, provoked by a defector to UKIP—Mark Reckless in Rochester and Strood. This follows Douglas Carswell retaining his Clacton seat this month to become UKIP's first elected MP after he defected

from the Tory party.

Cameron's internal situation is no better. UKIP continues to represent nothing so much as an external faction of the Tory euro-sceptic wing—who could either also defect to UKIP or force Cameron out as leader. An anonymous Cabinet minister warned that there would be a vote of no confidence in Cameron if the party lost Rochester and Strood. "If Reckless wins, there'll be 46 names," he threatened.

Peter Bone, MP for Wellingborough, said the government should make the referendum a Government Bill, even if this meant breaking the coalition with the Liberal Democrats. "If the Liberal Democrats want to walk out of the Government, let them do so," he said.

One of the two potential Tory challengers in Rochester and Strood, Anna Firth, has endorsed a policy advocated by both Reckless of UKIP and London Mayor Boris Johnson, Cameron's main rival in the Tory party. Firth said that the government's immigration policy is not "sensible" and urged an Australian-style points-based system already used to discriminate between migrants from outside the European Union to prevent "Romanian fruit pickers" from entering the UK.

Cameron has sought to bolster his position by warning in the *Sunday Telegraph* that a vote for UKIP could end with the election of a Labour government by default. "Let no-one deceive you that there is a third way. A vote for UKIP is a vote for Labour," he wrote, before boasting of how "Non-EU migration is now at its lowest levels since the 1990s—and we are committed to putting EU migration right at the heart of our negotiations in Europe..."

"We have also pledged to scrap Labour's Human Rights Act, ending the era of farcical human rights rulings handed down from Europe. And never forget: it is only the Conservative Party that is offering you that in-out referendum on Europe in 2017."

Labour's response, as usual, is to adopt the latest anti-immigrant rhetoric. Shadow Immigration Minister David Hanson said, "Labour is in favour of reform to European free movement rules and we will examine any proposals the government comes forward with to manage immigration with interest he declared "But why should anyone believe the Prime Minister when he has a record of making big promises on immigration and not delivering..."

Labour has also pledged support for a Tory proposal to opt back into the European Arrest Warrant scheme, which allows for the arrest and extradition of British subjects at the request of any EU country. "We're not playing politics with this. We're not going to be soft on crime," a spokesman for Labour leader Ed Miliband stated.

Labour is divided over its response to the proposed Tory referendum on Europe and there have been innumerable calls for the party to adopt a hardline anti-immigrant posture—especially after it won a by election in Heywood and Middleton against UKIP by just 617 votes.

The party has officially described the referendum on EU membership as "absolutely absurd" and a threat to the economy. But a poll of MPs found that 34 Labourites support a vote.

Kate Hoey, the MP for Vauxhall, said it is "very wrong" to oppose a referendum that is highly popular with traditional Labour voters. Miliband's inner circle is privately split over whether to endorse the referendum," she added. "I do genuinely feel I'm not a minority within Labour voters in the country," she said.

There have even been rumblings that Miliband should be replaced, with Andrew Mackinlay, the former MP for Thurrock, declaring his leadership a "complete disaster" and Damian McBride, the former adviser to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, declaring that "either Labour must be willing to change its leader, or its leader must be willing to change himself."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact