

UK: Cameron strikes post-election anti-European pose

Chris Marsden
14 May 2015

The new UK Conservative government has predictably chosen the issue of migration to spearhead its new hard line towards Europe.

Such efforts to whip up nationalism and xenophobia are a telling indication of the political intent behind Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge to renegotiate Britain's relationship with the European Union (EU), prior to an "in/out" referendum on continued membership.

Cameron invoked Britain's 18-year-old opt-out over the EU's "European Agenda on Migration" so that it is not included in a proposal to supposedly evenly distribute refugees fleeing the impact of imperialist military operations in Libya, Syria and elsewhere across member states.

In an opinion column in Rupert Murdoch's *Times*, Home Secretary Theresa May repeated the claim that rescuing migrants from death only encourages them.

"We cannot do anything which encourages more people to make these perilous journeys," she declared, "or which makes it easier for the gangs responsible for their misery. That is why the UK will not participate in a mandatory system of resettlement or relocation."

She called for an "an active programme of returns... to their country of origin" or to "other countries".

The UK has, in contrast, signalled its full support for the repressive measures to prevent migrants from entering Europe, deploying the warship HMS Bulwark between Libya and Italy.

Cameron also indicated that he will move quickly on his promised referendum on EU membership, probably in autumn 2016. He is hoping to use the kudos provided by his election victory and securing a slim majority in parliament to bring his own euro-sceptic wing into line, while strengthening his hand in negotiations with the EU.

He was cheered by all his newly-elected members of parliament Tuesday when he reiterated his referendum

pledge, but there are significant differences within the party over how far to pursue a possible EU rupture.

He has selected Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, Chancellor George Osborne and himself to lead talks—all of whom have at some time threatened a "Brexit" (British withdrawal from the EU).

Such threats are, however, meant to convince MPs that they can get their demands within the framework of the EU while neutering the political challenge from the UK Independence Party—which secured 12 percent of the vote in the general election on an anti-EU ticket.

Most important of all is that business interests, even those supportive of Cameron's demands for less economic regulation, etc., are not only opposed to a Brexit, but fearful of the impact of a prolonged period of uncertainty on the UK economy. This faces Cameron with a major political dilemma that now becomes a major threat to the strategic interests of British imperialism and to those of all the European powers.

Tory party unity may not last. Conservative MP David Davis told the *Daily Telegraph* that as many as 60 MPs would be prepared to vote for Britain's exit from the EU if Cameron failed to deliver on his demands.

Moreover, on many issues that Cameron has raised, any claim to victory will be largely a question of presentation rather than substance. He has said his planned reforms will require changes to the treaties governing the EU, but this is not possible before either 2016 or 2017 and would require unanimous support.

He has stated that he wants Britain to opt out from the EU's stated goal of forging an "ever closer union," will resist moves towards a European army, will not join the euro currency union and will oppose all manner of EU social legislation.

But aside from these general statements, he has centred his fire on measures to restrict access to benefits for EU migrants, greater powers for Westminster to block EU

legislation, opposing restrictions on business, strengthening free trade deals with the United States and Asia and protecting the City of London financial markets from EU legislation.

There is a possibility of movement on most of these issues. Germany, Britain's main rival, is ironically seen as a key ally—against France and east European states—in pushing for economic liberalisation, opposing social legislation and on possibly restricting benefits for migrants.

Cameron desperately wants an agreement he can sell, which is why he has abandoned calls for numerical caps on migrants. He drew up a list of reactionary measures including a four year delay for EU migrants wanting to claim in-work benefits or seeking access to social housing, stopping child benefit for dependents outside the UK, restrictions on bringing in relatives, expulsion from the UK after six months without work and stopping citizens from new EU member states from working in the UK until their economies have “converged”.

Eastern European leaders have rejected Cameron's demands, citing the EU's stated commitment to the free movement of peoples within the EU. But things could change, even while formally maintaining this commitment. Mat Persson, director of the Open Europe think tank, cited as the basis for this, “Most other European countries have a contributory system of benefits which automatically exclude migrant workers from claiming benefits until they have worked in the country for a certain period of time,” unlike the UK where “benefits are universal.”

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said he is ready to work to “strike a fair deal for the United Kingdom in the EU.”

Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, described the UK's key role “in ensuring that Europe has a common sense agenda, keeping the emphasis on a competitive economy through an effective Single Market, non-intrusive regulation, openness to trade with other nations, and a confident foreign policy.”

Manfred Weber, leader of the conservative group in the European Parliament and a coalition ally of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, while stating that “EU freedoms will not be negotiable,” added that “We Europeans must also start thinking about whether it is time for a larger treaty reform.”

This wave of conciliatory comment is an expression of the broad-based concern that the UK has placed the survival of the EU itself in danger.

Following the general election, Wolfgang Münchau wrote of Cameron's dangerous gamble: “Supporters of Britain's EU membership console themselves with opinion polls that appear to show a majority for their position. Do not fool yourself. Nobody can predict the outcome of a referendum that far in advance... It is more instructive to look at the political dynamics. There you have resurgent nationalism in Scotland and a possible English counter-reaction—a cocktail unhelpful to the EU cause.”

This raised “the hideous prospect of a simultaneous British exit from the EU and Greek departure from the eurozone.”

“The EU cannot afford both,” he stated.

To this dangerous scenario must be added the rise of anti-EU parties in Europe, most notably the National Front in France but also the smaller Alternative for Germany, which now has representation in five German states.

Judy Dempsey, of Carnegie Europe, wrote in the *Moscow Times* of US concerns at the UK's turn and of how this immediately benefits Germany, as of now the key US ally, but also its enemy, Russia.

“It was Merkel who pushed the European Union into imposing sanctions on Russia after it annexed Crimea in March 2014. It was Merkel who stiffened Cameron's backbone when it came to the sanctions issue. Merkel's Germany is the undisputed leader of Europe,” she wrote.

“However, even though British influence is waning in the EU, a Brexit would do untold damage to the integrity of the EU. The EU would lose a country whose input to security, strategy and defense issues cannot be underestimated.

“A Brexit would undoubtedly weaken the EU, which is in Russia's interests,” she continued. “That is why Merkel will do her utmost to try and find a way to ensure that Britain remains inside the EU, not outside.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact