

# UK Prime Minister Cameron outlines his demands for EU “reform”

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In a speech before the Royal Institute of International Affairs think tank in central London yesterday, Prime Minister David Cameron put forward his demands for a proposed renegotiation of the terms of Britain’s membership of the European Union (EU).

In his speech and in a letter sent to European Council President Donald Tusk, Cameron outlined four demands he wants as part of a “reformed” EU.

In order to appease the “euro-sceptic” wing of his party, Cameron pledged in the May general election that he would renegotiate the terms of Britain’s EU membership and hold an “in-out” referendum on the issue by the end of 2017.

By seeking changes to the EU, Cameron hopes to mollify, or at least neutralise, the threat from the anti-EU right within his ranks at the time of a referendum. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, more than 50 Tories back the newly formed “Conservatives for Britain” and will campaign for a withdrawal from the EU if Cameron is unable to secure the terms of membership they want.

Cameron also faces the political challenge of the UK Independence Party, to which several Tory MPs have already defected.

The prime minister’s grandstanding at Chatham House was an attempt to prove that he was in charge of the process of negotiations. However, he had no choice but to put his government’s demands forward this week. Initial talks between the UK government and the EU began in July, with the government stating it would not be pressured into putting forward any specifics regarding its stance.

The main EU powers opposed any drawn out negotiations, with Tusk and other leaders demanding the details of Britain’s position in advance of next week’s EU summit. At the last gathering of the EU in

October, Cameron was told that before renegotiations could begin in December, EU member states required at least a month to consider his demands.

Cameron was forced to agree, with the *Guardian* reporting, “The sudden shift by the prime minister in the wake of a volley of criticism of his tactics from EU capitals suggested that for the first time in what is expected to be very fractious negotiations, the Europeans and not the British were dictating the terms of the process.”

In his speech Cameron said, “We need a British model of membership that works for Britain and for any other non-euro members” and for EU “leaders to agree clear and binding principles that protect Britain and other non-euro countries.”

He called for the protection of Europe’s single market for non-euro countries, measures to boost competitiveness by setting “a target to cut the total burden on business” and the bringing together of “all the different proposals, promises and agreements on the single market, on trade, and on cutting regulation into one clear commitment that writes competitiveness into the DNA of the whole European Union.”

Britain should be exempt from the EU’s stated goal of an “ever-closer union,” which “we do not believe in ... and we do not subscribe to.”

Cameron said, “I am asking European leaders for a clear, legally binding and irreversible agreement to end Britain’s obligation to work towards an ever closer union.”

National parliaments should be bolstered and restrictions placed on EU migrants’ access to in-work benefits, including tax credits, Cameron demanded. “[P]eople coming to Britain from the EU must live here and contribute for four years before they qualify for in-work benefits or social housing,” he said.

Cameron concluded, “I do not deny that seeking changes which require the agreement of 27 other democracies, all with their own concerns, is a big task.”

This is an understatement.

Some of Cameron’s demands would require treaty changes and are opposed by not only the major EU powers but eastern European members. In November of last year, Cameron was forced to back down under pressure from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who said this would contravene the formal EU policy of the free movement of labour, on proposals for a cap on the number of EU migrants allowed to enter the UK, or an “emergency brake” on further migration.

Poland is opposed to restrictions on in-work welfare benefits, as the proposal would affect many Poles who are forced to work in the UK due to high unemployment at home.

To demand a change in policy restricting the right of foreign workers to access in-work benefits, and justify the Tories own austerity agenda, Cameron presented a picture in which the UK’s welfare system was about to collapse because of the current policy. The remarks were of a piece with Cameron’s right-wing agenda, which is aimed at reinforcing the demands of the corporations at the expense of workers’ rights.

He claimed, “...at any one time, around 40 percent of all recent European Economic Area migrants are supported by the UK benefits system with each family claiming on average around £6,000 a year in work benefits alone and over 10,000 recently-arrived families claiming over £10,000 a year.” He added, “We need to restore a sense of fairness, and reduce this pull factor subsidised by the taxpayer.”

The truth is that of 224,000 new arrivals, around 66 percent (148,000 new arrivals) are employed and receive in-work benefits, including tax credits. Workers who receive tax credits are by definition poorly paid, as the credits are a government subsidy to top up low wages.

In remarks directed to the Tory right he said, “I am not saying for one moment that Britain couldn’t survive outside the European Union,” noting that the UK was “the fifth largest economy in the world, the fastest growing economy in the G7 last year and the biggest destination for foreign direct investment in the EU.”

Cameron is walking a tightrope by threatening a

“Brexit”.

In the last months, the Confederation of British Industry and Bank of England have made clear they are in favour of British membership of the EU, as is big business generally.

The United States, the UK’s main international ally, is opposed to a British withdrawal, as is China, whose President Xi Jinping was recently feted for a week in Britain and with whom the Cameron government is developing extensive trade and commercial relations.

The Tory’s anti-EU wing responded to Cameron’s intervention with a combination of ridicule and denunciation. In parliament, London mayor Boris Johnson, who is a favourite to succeed Cameron as Tory leader, said the negotiations with other EU countries would be “tough”, with “blood all over the carpet” and stressed the UK could have a “very attractive” future outside the EU. Jacob Rees-Mogg attacked Cameron’s proposals as “pretty thin gruel”, while Bernard Jenkin said the UK would end up a “second tier” country and asked, “Is that it? Is that the sum total of the government’s position in this renegotiation?”

Sir Bill Cash said Cameron’s proposals were a “pig in a poke” and almost all of them would require treaty changes not on offer.

Within hours, the Polish and Slovakian governments rejected Cameron’s migrant benefits proposals. Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, responded in an equally hostile tone, commenting, “I have strong doubts about the legality of the four year ban on access to welfare benefits for EU citizens but wait to see what specific ideas the British government will come up with in the end in this particular area.”



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