



Union of European Federalists
Union Europäischer Föderalisten
Union des Fédéralistes Européens

**THE EU AND THE UK ELECTION:
DISSECTION, REFLECTION, DIRECTION**

*What does the General Election result mean for the UK's place in the EU?
What will it mean for the prospects of EU reform?*

REPORT

OUR GUESTS



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Moderator



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On 11 May 2015 the Union of European Federalists organised a debate between MEPs, journalists and representatives of the corporate world from different political orientations in order to decipher the implications of the UK General Election on the relations between London and Brussels and the prospects of reform for the EU in the following years. The panellists dissected the results, reflected about their causes and their meaning regarding the internal situation of the British landscape and discussed the direction that the UK policy vis-à-vis the EU will take with a view to the in-or-out referendum promised for 2017.

DISSECTION

Major changes in the British political landscape

British politics used to be very simple. The last election shows the increasing complexity of the political landscape of the UK.

On the one hand, this electoral *rendez-vous* constituted a stinging defeat for the Liberal Democrats across the country. This was partly due to big mistakes made by the party during their time in the coalition government. Nevertheless, Mr Andrew Duff also pointed out the strength of the Tory electoral machine. According to his own words, it will take ten years for the Liberals Democrats to rebuild themselves as a party following this election.

“There really were two different countries having two different elections. We view the EU differently to other parts of the Island. The results of the election shows a fantastic support for SNP, not necessarily for independence, but it marks a great track of achievement”.

Alyn Smith

On the other hand, in spite of a long socialist tradition in Scotland, the support for the Labour party has been almost reduced to zero, all to the benefit of the Scottish National Party. As Mr Alyn Smith acknowledged, the victory of the SNP does not necessarily reflect a surge in the popularity of separatist ideas, but rather a widening gap between England and Scotland, and a great disconnect between traditional British parties and the reality in the north.

Among the main points of divide between the north and the south it is possible to identify the greater place that the EU takes in the Scottish debate and the nation's claims for a change in the balances of power within the UK. The Scottish ask for a move in the direction of a genuine federation, where the aspirations of all the constitutive parts in terms of governance system and place in Europe would be taken into account equally.

After the unexpected victory of the Conservative party at the national level the European question will play a key role in the success of the new government and the positioning of the other parties on the political chessboard. The Labour party and the Liberal Democrats must learn lessons from the last months. It is no longer enough to warn against the risks of leaving the EU. They will have to put the real advantages of the Union forward and make concrete proposals to address the citizens' concerns. Regarding the majority, it will be confronted with the enormous challenge of defining the strategic guidelines for the renegotiation with Brussels, which its leader has wisely avoided in order to prevent any internal division before the elections. If not managed with tact and sensitivity, this issue could exacerbate the differences within the party and threaten the government majority in the House of Commons.

REFLECTION

The paradox: between UKIP and the EU

This election also reflects a paradox in the British political landscape. First, in spite of having lost rather than gained seats, UKIP emerges as a political force. Second, the latest polls about EU membership in the UK show a great lead for the pro-European side.

Although during the last months polls have proven to be an inexact science, the vote for UKIP and attachment to the European project should not be seen as a clear dichotomy. UKIP is a protest party, which is gaining ground among a generation of disillusioned young British who cannot find satisfying proposals to their concerns in the programmes of the traditional parties. According to Mr Duff and Mr Bailey, UKIP is filling the political gap left by traditional parties which do not dare to put credible and ambitious pro-European proposals forward.

“No single British party reflects the public’s opinion on the EU matter, by failing to support the European project or to clearly address the issue of the necessary scope of integration”.

Andrew Duff

At the same time, most UK citizens do not have strong positions regarding the EU.

According to Mr Richard Corbett, the surge in the number of votes cast for UKIP could also awaken dormant pro-European forces across the country, by raising the awareness of the importance of staying in the EU among euro-apathetics or euro-ignorants.

A new majority conservative government

The new conservative government will benefit from a thin majority in the House of Commons in order to implement its controversial programme. However, this new configuration poses new challenges, since David Cameron will not be able to use the coalition in case of division within his own field or in order to justify concessions made in the renegotiation with Brussels. Thus, to some panellists, the risk of implosion of the government is higher than in the previous mandate. On the other hand, Ms. Julie Girling bets on the unity of the Conservative party around its leader and the objective of presenting a satisfying alternative to the British people regarding the UK’s place in the EU.

In any case the Conservative party will have to undergo its ordeal by fire very soon, since it will have to present a detailed list of requests to the European Council on June 25th.

The weight of Scotland

Before the vote in Scotland last year, David Cameron promised to move forward on the federal path in order to allow nations to have a greater extent of influence on the country’s decision-making processes. The widening gap between Scotland and the rest of the country reflected in the last election makes it obvious that the European question will create tensions between Edinburgh and London. Although it is still unclear whether the SNP will be able to have any weight in the shaping of Cameron’s renegotiation strategy, thanks to its representation in the House of Commons it will endeavour to introduce the option for “status quo” in the referendum ballot and to make the double majority or votes and nations a requirement for the validation of the result.

“If Cameron plays a dirty game in negotiating with Brussels in order to get a safe Brexit, he should be concerned about the unity of his own country”.

Elmar Brok

From a broader perspective and irrespective of the SNP’s position, Scotland will most likely be a determining factor in the UK’s membership renegotiation. As pointed out by Mr Rory Watson, a journalist at Europolitics, last year’s referendum did not offer a solid and definitive settlement regarding Scottish independence. In this situation, Mr Cameron would better avoid forcing a Brexit or he could face risking the disintegration of the UK.

“For Scotland to be dragged out of the EU against its will would be a democratic outrage”

Alvn Smith

DIRECTION

David Cameron's Strategy regarding the EU

“Countering the negative effects of free movement is among our top priorities because that’s the top concern of people polled. [...] Personally, many Conservatives accept that it is a non-negotiable issue and recognise its benefits, but its negative effects can be tackled”.

Julie Girling

According to Ms Girling, Mr Cameron will concentrate the renegotiation with Brussels on four main topics: impact of freedom of movement on the national infrastructure, the Treaty requirement for an “ever closer Union”, the negative effects for the UK of a deepened Economic and Monetary Union and the possibility for the Member States to stop the legislative process when a European act threatens their national interests (known as the “red card”).

Regarding the procedure, it seems that most of those requests could be tackled through the adoption of secondary EU legislation, i.e. not requiring Treaty change. In addition, the MEPs present agreed that no Treaty change will be possible before 2017. The most sensible approach for David Cameron seems to consist of portraying his requests as in the general interest of all the Member States in order to ask for a special status for the UK. As Ms Julie Girling points the UK is not the only country sceptical of the current EU and wanting change.

However, concern was expressed about the manner in which the Prime Minister may conduct such a sensitive negotiation. If he goes for policy change, he will have to deal with an extremely complex system and multiple actors (his European partners, the European Institutions, the British nations, the British people and his own party). Some panellist warned that if he keeps on using the same negotiation style, according to them, characterised by “blackmailing”, nothing good can be expected for the UK. According to Mr Alyn Smith, Cameron will have first to set a clear strategy, apparently absent so far, and to cool down the debate on the EU issue, in order to escape from the toxic tone of the last years.

In any case, Europe is waiting for this question to be rapidly settled, and ask David Cameron to be as clear as possible in his demands. For instance, Mr Brok asked for a solution to be found before the end of the year, and Mr Bailey warned that the other EU Member States would not tolerate the “difficult child in Europe for a very long time”.

What is the price that Europe is ready to pay to keep the UK in?

The British seem to be banking on the fears of fellow Europeans that the UK leaves. It is also very difficult to forecast the concessions that the EU and the other Member States will be willing to make. However it seems clear that the negotiation means at the disposal of Mr. Cameron will not allow him to force a great move regarding the basic principles of the Union. In addition, attacking one of the four freedoms would open a Pandora's Box, since other Member States could ask for exceptions in other fields, e.g. the free provision of services, which would affect the British economy very severely. On top of that, the European Parliament would be likely to refuse pieces of legislation dictated by the interest of a single country.

For these reasons, the EU seems unwilling to pay a very high price to keep the UK in. Some concessions may be made in the fields of social security benefits, but the very nature of the European legislative process and the EU citizens' rights will not be sacrificed, at least in this round. In addition, the EU will have

“If Cameron has good advisers he will know that the way it works in Brussels is not by punching the table. The world has changed a lot, not only Europe. [...] It is not just immigrants coming in, it is also us selling goods and services out, and that’s crucial for the UK economy”.

Martin Bailey

“Some principles of EU law are not negotiable, including free movement. It is time the UK makes up its mind”

Elmar Brok

to be very careful not to confer too many concessions to the UK, which may also be attractive for other opt-out Member States like Denmark or Hungary.

According to some panellist, given the already peripheral nature of the UK's membership and the many opt-outs that the UK already benefits from, the EU could be inclined to let it leave in order to deepen the integration of the euro area. In such a case, the solution would consist in negotiating a new status of associated member for the UK similar to but more advanced than the European Economic Area.

The role of the media and the corporate world

The role that the corporate world will play in the renegotiation and the referendum campaign will be considerable, although highly unpredictable. One of the reasons why the Conservatives won the general election was the fear of major corporations that change in government could hinder the economic recovery, but they support the UK's EU membership. On the other hand, small and medium businesses look for a higher level of protection from European and third-country markets, which could benefit 10 Downing Street in obtaining concessions from Brussels. In addition, the most outspoken corporations on the pro-European side are foreign companies, which could be taken badly by some parts of the British population.

With regard to the media, the political parties will have to be very careful in the way they address themselves to the traditional media and develop new approaches for social media. Although conventional media is essential to convey political messages, they may tend to amplify the simplest, and often the most negative aspects in some areas, particularly immigration or the UK's contribution to the EU budget, impeding a rational debate and provoking misunderstandings. For this reason, the supporters of the European Union will have to develop a new strategy, based on rationality and facts, not fear.

CONCLUSION

The General Election reflects the great changes that the British political landscape is undergoing, characterised by more power for the constitutive nations, a still fragile unity of the country and a significant protest vote in response to the inability of traditional parties to address the main concerns of the population and the European question in a satisfactory manner.

The solidity of the Conservative Party will be tested soon on the European and the Scottish questions.

The renegotiation of the UK's status within the EU will be an extremely delicate mission for the Prime Minister. He will have to invest all his political and diplomatic skills in order to live up to his electoral commitments, while keeping his country together and not jeopardising British commercial interests in Europe.

On the top of that, the European Union seems unwilling and unable to make great concessions in order to keep the UK in.

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