

It is no wonder that Cameron insisted on a 3-line whip. The alternatives proposed by the eurosceptics are unconvincing, unrealistic and fail to grasp just how the EU actually works.

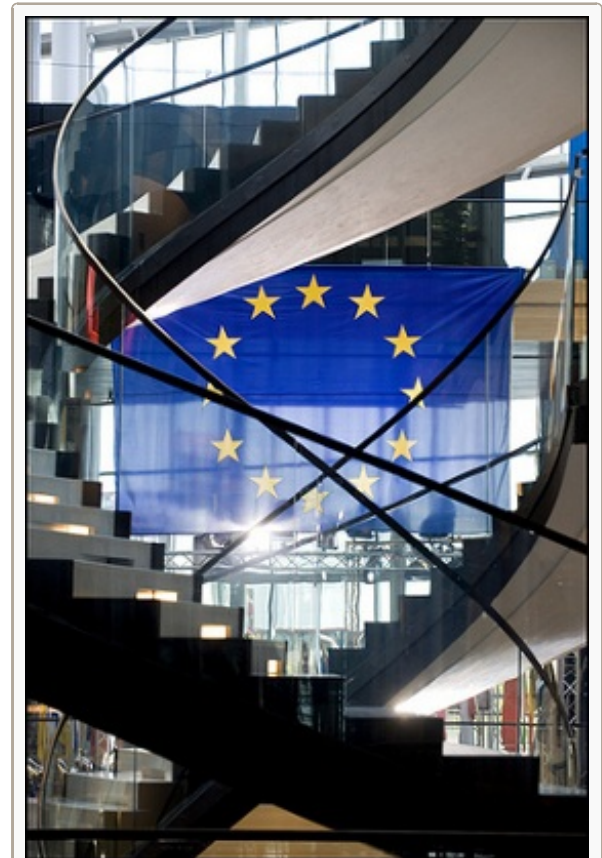
David Cameron is on the back foot in the wake of last night's Commons rebellion over a referendum to leave the EU. But, as [Olaf Cramme](#) argues, he was right to hold the line against the eurosceptics. None of their proposals to change the UK's relationship with the EU would be in Britain's interest.



David Cameron used to describe himself as a “eurosceptic”. Yet unlike many others in this camp, he never really defined and spelled out his vision on UK-EU relations, confining his remarks in speeches to the general objective of making Europe more transparent, accountable and decentralised. He did so because he was not prepared to restrict his political room for manoeuvre, sensing that the EU is not an ordinary policy issue up for ideological gratification, but a serious and complex matter concerning the wider national interest.

Of course, this is a hard lesson to learn when in government – all the more when confronted with a frightening crisis of sovereign debt in the eurozone which threatens to bury not only the continent's common currency, but also the UK's fragile recovery. Agreeing in such turbulent times to a polarising and destabilising EU “in or out” referendum would have made Britain, in the words of former Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind, a “[laughing stock](#)”. Therefore unsurprisingly, Cameron insisted on a three-line whip in the hope of extinguishing this unsettling debate, even sending out William Hague, one of his most euro-sceptic ministers, to say positive things about the EU, regarding for instance trade and foreign policy.

Does this mean the prime minister has become an EU “pragmatist”, as some now want to call him? Certainly not. But tough government choices in the face of a stalling economy have forced him to rise above the parochialism of Britain's debate on the future of the EU. This debate was always going to haunt him: based on an excessively one-dimensional perspective, it centres around whether Britain actually gets a “fair deal” from being a member of the EU and to what extent policymakers in Westminster are hindered by Brussels to exert their free democratic will. Such reasoning is fuelled by [opinion polls](#), signalling that a majority of the British electorate remain unconvinced on both fronts (albeit the questions of “salience” and citizens deliberations are rarely factored into the equation). Eurosceptics extrapolate from this that it is in the UK's national interest to repatriate large swaths of powers or leave the EU all together.



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Corresponding plans drawn up in opposition or on the backbenches, however, look far less credible in a position of responsibility, as Cameron now painfully admits. He realises that good politics is first and foremost about having a plausible and workable alternative in place – and this is where the debate has dismally failed so far.

Examples abound. Take, for instance, the radical call for outright separation. Advocates argue that the EU has become irrelevant in the new multi-polar world order; that Brussels' burdensome regulations crush the benefits of belonging to the Single Market; that open trade is better taken care of by global arbiters, such as the WTO; or that Britain's interests are anyway much more aligned with America than with the rest of Europe. On closer inspection, none of these claims actually stand up: the EU continues to exert real influence – in trade talks in particular but also on foreign policy issues, as the recent sanctions on Syria have shown;

studies depicting net positive effects of regional economic integration are overwhelming; the WTO remains far less effective against protectionist tendencies than the EU's far-reaching competition rules; and not even the US wants Britain to go it alone. Rather the opposite.

Take the idea of Britain as the "new Switzerland". The idea put forward is that Britain joins the ranks of those European nations that have a stake in the Single Market but are exempted from (much of) Brussels' political and regulatory control. In the wake of the euro crisis, it is claimed that this re-arrangement would surely be achievable, if necessary by blackmailing the eurozone countries over any forthcoming treaty change. In any case, Britain runs a trade deficit with the EU so it would not dare to raise punitive tariffs. Again, as the Economist's [Bagehot](#) also explains, this vision rests on pretty shaky pillars: scale matters, both in relation to political and economic weight. Britain would never be granted Switzerland's free-ride while its current account deficit cannot strengthen its negotiating hand in an essentially large, closed economic bloc. Ask British EU diplomats and they will tell you with pleasure about the chances of such a scenario succeeding.

Or, take ideas to use British power from within the EU to radically alter the relationship, if not the entire European construction. Some, as former foreign secretary [Lord Owen](#), suggest institutionalising a counterweight to the euro group by bringing together the likes of the UK, Sweden, Denmark or Poland in an attempt to pool the national interests of non-euro countries. The underlying idea is to avoid a genuine two-tier Europe which threatens to split the EU into a vanguard and rearguard, as well as fortify common liberal positions. However, such a concept completely ignores that for most non-euro countries the links to the core are far more important than setting up a permanent outlier from which to influence decision-making in the centre. If the euro manages to survive, its pulling power is likely to be even greater. It was for this reason that the majority of them ultimately joined the Euro-Plus-Pact.

In short, none of the alternatives put forward by Britain's vocal Eurosceptics have been convincing. In fact, they are the result of a poor debate: one in which the single focus is on the EU's complicated set-up, technocratic practices and democratic shortcomings. This focus reinforces popular lament which David Cameron very much shares. But as prime minister, he cannot let vague sentiments trump stark political and economic realities. The size of yesterday's rebellion on the issue of an EU referendum means that euro scepticism is growing further among the political class. Will the gap between rhetoric and action too?