

The next UK government must not let talk of a Brexit undermine its attempts to influence EU decision-making

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*With the UK going to the polls on Thursday, it is still far from certain which party will emerge with enough seats to form the next government. **Anand Menon** writes that regardless of whether Labour or the Conservatives win power, the issue of Europe will play a key role in the next parliament. He argues that there is a danger talk of a referendum on EU membership could undermine attempts by the UK to shape EU decision-making, which would be particularly undesirable given that the current EU agenda is more congruent with British interests than it has been at any time in recent memory.*



Whatever the government that comes to power following the general election on Thursday, Britain's relations with the European Union will remain a central political issue. The danger, however, is that debate will be couched solely in terms of the desirability or not of membership. The demands of effective day-to-day engagement with the Union will be studiously overlooked.

This is potentially damaging. Whilst Britain undergoes a crisis of identity, the work of the EU continues as normal. And its current agenda is perhaps more congruent with British interests than at any time in recent memory. By opting out of the routine politics of Brussels, our political leaders risk foregoing substantive benefits for the British economy.

Were David Cameron to continue as Prime Minister, a referendum on membership would be held before the end of 2017. Were he to lose, the EU would doubtless loom large in a Conservative Party leadership contest, and a Labour government would come under sustained pressure to grant a popular vote. Either way, the issue of British membership would be a live one.

Given what is at stake, it is hardly surprising that the debate over Brexit is prominent. Yet it is not, and should not be, the only issue in British dealings with the EU. Whatever the political complexion of the next government, while the UK remains a member of the Union it will continue to be affected by decisions reached within that body. It will also continue to enjoy an ability to shape those decisions. Overlooking day-to-day policy making to focus on longer-term existential struggles, therefore, is hardly an optimal strategy.



And this is all the more so because the European Union has an agenda that is almost uniquely aligned with British interests. First, there is the mood music. For all the hostility with Downing Street that characterised his selection, the Commission President presented a work programme containing a meagre 23 proposals in a nod to those, including successive British governments, who have fretted about EU over regulation. His Vice President, Frans Timmermans, has maintained the momentum by pressing for the withdrawal of numerous legislative schemes.

The contemporary Union is thus receptive to traditional British concerns about its tendency to interfere in the ‘nooks and crannies’ of national life. Moreover, those issues on which it *is* currently engaged mesh neatly with British priorities. In March of this year the European Commission fleshed out its ideas for a digital single market. Britain is well ahead of other member states when it comes to the percentage of its population that engages in e-commerce (some 85 per cent as compared to an EU wide average of 50 per cent that have ever shopped online). Its consumers are therefore ideally placed to benefit from an opening of the digital market, while numerous businesses, both large and small, will profit from an expanded online consumer base – only 15 per cent of Europeans have purchased goods online from another member state.

Meanwhile, in September 2014, President Juncker tasked incoming British Commissioner Jonathan Hill with launching a [capital markets union](#) by 2019. This would involve the introduction of measures to develop various non-bank sources of finance available across state borders. Whilst most assessments suggest that the creation of such a union would benefit the EU economy as a whole, the UK, the largest capital market in the continent by far, stands to gain disproportionately from such an extension of the single market.

The EU, then, is doing much less. But what it *is* doing promises to benefit the UK. This situation may not endure. It would not take much – another eruption of crisis in the Eurozone, an intensification of the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, or renewed fighting in Ukraine – to shift the attention of key member states and reduce the momentum of these latest measures to complete the single market.

Consequently, it is important that a new government – whether Labour or Conservative led – engages with its European partners and with the EU institutions as soon as possible, starting with the European summit meeting scheduled for June. Shaping the EU’s legislative agenda is a complex undertaking, requiring that time be expended in building alliances and ensuring active participation in all key meetings. It necessitates the expenditure of significant effort at both official and political levels.

Britain has traditionally played this game very well. In recent times, however, the ferocity of Euroscepticism on the government’s back benches has made ministers reluctant to ensure British influence in Brussels. Equally, the tone of debate about the EU hardly inspires high flying civil servants to take a lead in shaping EU policy, let alone in seeking the kinds of jobs within the EU institutions from which they could help their country pursue its interests.

Given the favourable state of the EU agenda, it would be more foolhardy than ever for an incoming government to eschew efforts to shape legislative developments in Brussels. Yet there is a danger that, in focusing on the referendum wood, we will lose sight of the legislative trees. Certainly, the question of membership is a crucial one. However, the potential for a vote on membership in the future does not obviate the need for a robust defence of substantive British interests in the present.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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